

*Article*

# Reflections on the 70-year Development of Foreign-Language Teaching and Research in China<sup>1</sup>

**Weiguo Qu**

Fudan University, China

## **Abstract**

Over the past 70 years, and in the past 40 years in particular, there has been tremendous growth in foreign-language teaching and research in China. While this growth has taken the teaching and associated research into an advanced sophisticated phase, bringing them into step with the development of their international counterparts, a new set of problems and challenges have emerged. The paper is a reflection on the features of the development and the problems the sectors must confront and cope with in order to develop sustainably. I argue in the paper that not all the problems are related to academic factors. Non-academic ones pose graver threats for the sectors to overcome.

## **Keywords**

Foreign language teaching and research in China, 70-year development

## **1 Introduction**

There have been many canonical discussions reviewing the development of foreign- language teaching and research in China. As most of the discussions are conducted from perspectives such as the state's foreign-language policies, market needs, or with views on reform in the institutional systems, the development has been traced with top-down approaches in a systematic and comprehensive manner. (Liu, 1995; Su, 1997, 2014; Li & Xu, 2018; Dai, 2018; Xu, 2018; Wen, 2019) However, my paper is not a historical overview of the important achievements of the past 70 years or a mega-narrative of the milestone events in the period but a critique of the features and problems that have emerged during the different stages. The purpose of venturing such a discussion is that I believe we have entered an important stage that requires us to reflect soberly on what we have achieved and what we have to confront. In a time of strong nationalist sentiment that calls for finding a voice of our own, we should be alert to the dangers of the sentiment that will alienate us again from the healthy academic course.

My basic hypothesis is that while the unusually rapid growth of the past 40 years since the era of opening up began has brought about impressive prosperity in teaching and research, both now face unprecedented challenges, largely related to the institutional and disciplinary problems that have been ignored as development has continued apace. It is high time for us to take on these challenges in order for the sectors to overcome the crises they face. To comprehend the challenges we need to consider some unusual features of the development, thus putting the challenges in a better perspective.

Given the ambiguities of some key terms and their idiosyncratic use in China, it is necessary to define them before we embark on the discussion. “Foreign-language teaching and research” here refers only to teaching and research in mainland China; for the purpose of the discussion, “foreign-language teaching” means foreign-language teaching at the tertiary level, with the focus on the teaching of English majors (EM). Although the teaching of English for special purposes (ESP) is equally important, I will not include it in the present discussion simply because the challenges I address are mostly about the EM sector, and in China when we talk about English teaching we generally have EM in mind. In addition, according to the official categorisation, EM is classified as a disciplinary branch that is on par with long established disciplines such as history, philosophy and literature, whereas ESP is mainly categorised as a non-disciplinarian language-teaching program aimed at enhancing basic skills rather than teaching disciplinary knowledge. “Foreign-language research” denotes the linguistic research in the EM sectors in universities and colleges. As the English sector is the largest, hence in a sense most representative, my discussion mainly targets teaching and research in English departments. Finally, my use of the term “mainland China” is open to question, because given the size of the country and the uneven development in different regions, it is really hard to come up with convenient generalisations that can capture features and problems across the regions.

As the discussion covers 70 years, it cannot avoid the complexities involved in periodisation. Although there are differences in approach, the consensus in academic circles in China is to divide the development into two basic periods on the basis of political periodisation: 30 years before and including the Cultural Revolution (1949-1976) and 40 years after the revolution when opening up started (1977-present). The chief reason for treating the Cultural Revolution as a watershed is that English was regarded as an important political tool before opening up. Foreign languages then were uprooted from their rich cultural heritage and reloaded with values that agreed with the “dominant political discourse”. (Qu, 2009, p.151) The changes that have taken place since the Cultural Revolution have, in a sense, depoliticised foreign languages, thus making it possible for the sectors to develop along the normal academic courses as practiced internationally. One simple example may suffice to illustrate what is meant by normality. Nowadays beginners start their English learning with everyday English instead of the devotional slogan “Long live Chairman Mao.” Some scholars have attempted at a more refined periodisation for the past 40 years. Among them, Wen’s (2019) can be considered the most representative. She has divided the 70 years into four periods: 1) the period of turmoil (1949-77), which is another term we often use to characterise the period before opening up; 2) the period of recovery (1978-99); 3) the period of rapid development (2000-11); and 4) the period of advanced development (2012-present).

I do not object to Wen’s periodisation in principle but merely for the sake of the simplicity of discussion I choose “normal stage” and “abnormal stage” to periodise the 70 years. I use the word abnormal because as teaching and research before opening up were mainly determined by non-academic factors, they were not conducted in line with the generally accepted normal academic rules and principles. The period was also abnormal in that both sectors were disconnected with the rest of the world, trapped in a forced seclusion. Since opening up began, both sectors have managed to develop in a manner that respects commonsense academic rules of and principles in their respective fields. As foreign languages are depoliticised and interaction with the outside world is restored, normality has thus been restored. I keep the refined two-period sub-division since the beginning of opening up because of the marked differences in the periods, although mine is much cruder than Wen’s. There is certainly no denying that such periodisation is subjective, but it seems to serve my purpose better. I just follow Seaver’s view for that matter:

Fundamentally, periodisation depends on what aspect of human experience the historian has under examination. (1998, p. 233)

Another reason for the crude division is that, for complicated historical reasons, the institutional establishment of foreign language majors was founded not on the basic principles of tertiary education

or on disciplinary logic but on the state's policies and market needs, and hence the relationships between the periods are never ones of academic causality. That implies that many problems that the foreign-language and research sectors have encountered over the years are largely caused by non-academic or non-disciplinary factors. Therefore, people tend to base the periodisation on political considerations.

Apart from terms and periodisation, there are some serious non-academic factors we need to consider in critiquing the development. The first factor is teachers. For historical reasons teachers in different periods received education and training of fundamentally different kinds. Hence teachers of different generations differ sharply in terms of knowledge and language competence. This is perhaps the decisive factor that shapes the characteristics of each period, and this can explain why there is little normal continuity across generations, and why discontinuity is a marked feature when we make periodic comparisons. My description of the generational differences here is, again, a crude one, which only gives us some idea of the kinds of differences in the EM sector. Teachers can roughly be classified into four generations. Teachers in the first generation were educated before 1949. Perhaps the first generation is the hardest to define because before 1949 China was in a series of wars that gravely disrupted the economy and education. Many English teachers of that generation were either not well-trained in English or in teaching. But there were some outstanding scholars who had received good education overseas. The most representative of these scholars are Xu Guozhang, Wang Zuoliang, Zhang Daozhen, Yu Dayin and Zhao Mengrui. These scholars played a pivotal role in the period before opening up, and they exercised an important influence in the period after reform began. They are still highly esteemed for their remarkable ability in English and research.

Most of the second generation were formally schooled after 1949 but before opening up. Gui Shichun, Hu Zhuangling, Dai Weidong, Lu Gusun and Liu Runqing are among the most distinguished of this generation. What makes the second generation different from the first is that they were educated exclusively in China, with extremely limited exposure to the concurrent outside academic world. They grew up in a monolingual environment in which English was virtually not functional. However, some of them were lucky enough to have gained overseas experience thanks to opening up. That overseas experience greatly shaped their academic careers. They played a decisive role in the period after opening up began.

The third generation refers to those who studied after opening up, but as it took quite a time for university education to recover and to normalise, their education was not systematic and well-resourced. They did not have much access to resources important for the cultivation of language competence and research skills when they studied at university. As the second generation was mostly responsible for teaching, the training they underwent was far from rigorous both academically and linguistically. What was fortunate for the generation is that with the rapid growth of the economy and opening up, situations improved drastically. A significant number of them managed to go abroad either as visiting scholars or to study for postgraduate degrees after they graduated from university. With ever-increasing internationalisation, this generation developed in a transcultural environment that was unavailable to the second generation. Their visions are different from those of the second generation. This generation is now of age, having an important role in the transformation of foreign-language teaching and research in China.

The fourth generation are the teachers who had their tertiary education in the 1990s and later when teaching and research had considerably recovered, and education both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels were significantly normalised in terms of systematicity and internationalisation. A high percentage of them have PhD degrees, gained in China or elsewhere. Early exposure to resources overseas and access to interaction with the concurrent outside academic world have given them an edge in terms of language ability, academic vision and internationalisation over other generations. As far as formal university education is concerned, what they received was systematic and rigorous. As a result, they have different conceptions of foreign-language research.

What this extremely coarse classification tells us is that owing to their different educational experiences, the four generations have little in common, each generation possessing its own paradigms

and visions. That is why I claim the academic relationships between generations are not one of continuity and inheritance. The development is thus discontinuous in vision and practice. Of course, it should be pointed out that within each generation there are huge differences. Teachers in developed regions have far more chances than those in developing ones.

The second factor is the influences from overseas upon teaching and research in China. Before opening up, foreign-language teaching and research had virtually no contact with their counterparts abroad, but since opening up began, China witnessed a huge importation of Western theories thanks to the second generation's overseas experiences and the hiring of many foreign teachers. The theories met no resistance and thrived instantly because when they were introduced there was virtually no operable theory that guided teaching and research practices in China. These theories immediately assumed leading roles, directing and dictating teaching and research. The origins of the diverse or discontinuous leaps in the development can be clearly traced to overseas theories, echoing the external paradigmatic changes. The factor is of vital importance in understanding the growth that has occurred because in a sense it accounts for the parasitic nature of that growth.

The third factor is perhaps no less important. Foreign-language teaching and research have always been institutionally affected and constrained by the state's policies. It is important to note that as a discipline they were established not on any academic grounds but for the purpose of serving the developmental needs of the country. Ever since, the needs of the state have definitely shaped the needs, concerns and even visions of the two sectors. There is not much autonomy, especially for teaching. Before opening up they were subjected exclusively to the political needs of the state (Qu, 2009). Since opening up began, meeting the economic needs of the state and those of the markets have become the driving forces that have defined direction, scale and even vision. For instance, many years ago the state not only demanded that English departments increase their enrolment disregarding their actual capacity but also set up many more English departments in response to the needs of the jobs market, ignoring the potential grave consequences if the markets flipped. While the expansion both in the number of students and in the number of departments helped reduce the pressure of the markets for the time being, it had an inestimable negative impact on the EM sector years later when the markets started to churn out new demands and the state redefined its needs. The current dispute over the English major is mostly related to this (Cai, 2018; Qu & Chen, 2019). I am of the view that when we critique the development we should never ignore the fact that most of the problems or even crises that foreign-language teaching and research faced at different times arise from inherent conflict between academic and non-academic needs and agendas.

## 2 Development of Foreign-language Teaching

Our brief characterisation of the 70-year development of teaching is based on three important aspects: textbooks, teaching syllabuses and the aims of the majors. There are several reasons for selecting these three aspects. EM teaching relies heavily on textbooks, so changes in the textbooks can inform us of the direction of development. Second, teaching in almost all universities is subject to the control, at the national level, of a committee of foreign-language teaching, which formulates the compulsory national syllabus for EM teaching nationwide. The aims of the English majors are closely related to national syllabuses at different times, but there are important variations for most universities in their response to the needs of the jobs market.

For the purpose of speculative illustration, I select just one set of textbooks each from the periods before and after opening up because these two sets of textbooks were not only popular in their times but also reflected basic teaching approaches. The first one, titled *English*, published in 1962, was compiled exclusively by Chinese scholars, Prof. Xu Guozhang, Prof. Yu Dayin and Prof. Xu Yanmou.

It is generally agreed in Chinese academic circles that this set best represents the traditional approach of foreign-language teaching. It should be noted that all the compilers belonged to the first generation, all educated before 1949. Xu Guozhang and Yu Daying studied in England. All had remarkable mastery of English, well-versed both in English culture and literature and classic Chinese. The textbook was in eight volumes, with many simplified, abridged and original texts from native-language sources. However, many texts in the first four volumes were written by the Chinese scholars to cater to domestic political considerations. Partly because of the great reputation of the compilers, and partly because of the scarcity of textbooks at the time, *English* dominated the market before the Cultural Revolution. It was used by English majors in most universities in the intensive reading class, the core compulsory course that ran from the first year to the final fourth year for English majors.

The textbook was highly acclaimed for its literary taste in the selection of texts, its elaborate exegetical method in annotation, its close reading method to texts, its Marxist approach in interpretation and elaborate design of exercises in vocabulary and grammar.

Most importantly, teachers responded positively because methodologically it upheld the traditional guiding principles and the teaching methods of the Chinese exegetics or the canonised approach to the teaching of the Chinese classics. Given the circumstances of the time, which had little need for international interaction, the book concentrated mainly on promoting students' ability in reading and translation. I believe it is the most successful example typical of the traditional translation-grammar approach.

The textbook was banned during the Cultural Revolution, which rejected anything from the capitalistic West. But it failed to regain its popularity once opening up began because of texts with highly political content and texts that drew on literature from 19th century literature. People wanted English of current relevance and practical value. For some time different universities selected and used different textbooks, some of which were composed by the Chinese teachers of the second generation. Nevertheless, there was not one single textbook that could achieve anything close to the success of Xu et al's *English*. However, the situation of diversity was abruptly changed when *New Concept English*, a textbook compiled by L. G. Alexander and published by Longman in 1967, was introduced to China in the 1980s. Although there were not many original copies around, myriad pirated editions helped to make it an instant success. Though the teaching and learning concepts underlying the textbook that were different from the traditional exegetic approach posed a big challenge, teachers were attracted to the book for its manageable short texts, variegated styles, and realistic content that brought English closer to real life situations. Of course, there were tapes of RP accents that facilitated the learning of oral English. The textbook appeared to rise to the occasion when people desired practical aid to helping learn English for the purpose of communication. The textbook was introduced when English was no longer seen merely as a tool to acquire knowledge. Although many of the teachers still used the traditional approach to teach the book, the new ideas couched in the entire set of the books were hard to ignore. The new types of exercises got the better of the traditional grammar-translation approach. For many years *New Concept English* dominated intensive reading courses in many universities.

I am of the view that the textbook helped the transition of teaching English from the emphasis on reading and translation to a cultivation of the comprehensive linguistic competence that includes reading, writing, listening and speaking. It offered a practical demonstration of theories of the communicative approach that were introduced in teaching about the same time. These theories, in turn, helped put *New Concept English* in perspective. It is certainly an exaggeration to give credit to the textbook for starting the communicative teaching practice here but I think we can safely say it contributed enormously in making the communicative approach take root in China. The communicative approach managed to usher in a significant paradigmatic transformation in line with teaching theories in the West.

Paradoxically, while opening up has made it possible for English-language learning to develop rapidly, the rise of the general level of English has drastically diminished the needs of the market for English majors. One of the human resources manager put it thus:

We cannot afford the luxury of hiring an English professional who has no other skills. (Qu, 2012, p. 16)

In response, the national committee revised the national syllabus to accommodate the change. The committee made a decision that has had far-reaching implications for EM, bringing about a monumental paradigm shift in the sector. Briefly, the decision centres on the idea of “English plus”, which requires English majors to be conversant with some professional knowledge or practical skills in addition to the mastery of English so they can meet the needs of the state and be competitive in the market (Dai, 2018). The concept and the practice of English plus that implies English is only a skill, disemboweling it of the substantial content of the humanities, has radically transmuted syllabuses and curriculums in most universities. Consequently, although English courses still account for the bulk of curriculums, they have lost their centrality. The focus of the syllabus has shifted to some professional knowledge or skills that are in good demand in the market. As market-oriented practicality has thus become the sole criterion in selecting a bedfellow for English, courses such as trade and business have easily taken over, and the traditional core courses of the humanities have been considerably marginalised.

Apart from the decision on English plus, which has changed the national syllabus for EM in response to the needs of the jobs market, doubts about the aims of teaching English arose towards the end of the 1990s. Many believe that because EM teaching has focused too much on practical knowledge and linguistic skills, the training of students’ ability in critical thinking has been ignored. EM students are conspicuously weak in critical thinking. The weakness becomes particularly striking when EM students are compared with students of other majors. Although there had always been questions of the kind, the matter attracted serious attention nationwide only when Huang Yuanshen, a well-known English scholar, published a paper in which it was claimed that “English majors are deficient in critical thinking” (1998). Another scholar, Sun Youzhong, attributes the problem to EM teaching, arguing that “the ability to think critically is the soft spot with English majors” (2011, p. 51). Since then, the critical thinking ability of English majors has remained the most discussed and debated issue in teaching across the country (Huang, 2010; Sun, 2011; Wen et al, 2010; Qu, 2015).

It is important to note that the discussion is of an essentially different nature from that of the English plus one. The latter argues that the aim of EM teaching is to equip students with knowledge and skills for the job market, whereas the former attempts to redefine the aim of EM teaching in terms of the general principles of university education. The English plus decision is criticised for downgrading university EM teaching to the level of vocational education (Qu, 2015). Recently a new round of discussion has started in the sector on a series of questions concerning the status of the English major as a discipline at the university level. The questions include: What exactly is the disciplinary status of the English major in a university? What is the ideal disciplinary content for the English major? What distinguishes the English major in a university from that in a vocational school? Should the courses of the English major be conceptualised within the framework of the humanities or the social sciences? Is an English department different from one in a university in the United States? How indispensable is literature to the program? How can we define the English major in terms of knowledge? The central question underlying all these and other questions is: What is the aim of English-major education?

### **3 Development of Foreign-language Research**

Linguistic research in foreign-language teaching has always been heavily influenced by overseas theories. Before opening up, the influence came mainly from the Soviet Union, and it was densely politicised. Since opening up began and reconnected China with the rest of the world, research in foreign-language teaching and research has developed at a reeling speed propelled by the various kinds of theories from the West. I divide the 70-year development into three stages: (1) pre-theory; (2) theory

acquisition; (3) multi-disciplinary theory application. Again, I focus only on linguistic research in the EM sector.

The pre-theory stage refers to the period before opening up (1949-77), in which there was almost no academic interaction between the foreign-language research sector and its counterparts in the West. It is called pre-theory simply because there was next to no specific linguistic theories that could be used in the field. What was adopted was the general non-linguistic theory that was of a political kind. The book that ruled the day was *Stalin on Issues Concerning Linguistics* (1950), a collection of essays written by the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. As the book addresses language in highly theoretical terms, it had little influence on foreign-language research, which then mostly aimed at resolving concrete issues related to teaching and the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar. In other words, research in the sector was more of a pragmatic kind. The best publications illustrative of the research of the stage are Ge Chuangui's *A Dictionary of English Usage* (1958), Zhang Daozhen's *Practical English Grammar* (1958), Yao Shanyou's *Subjunctive Mood in English* (1964), etc.

The theory-acquisition stage covers the first 20 years after opening up (1978-98). The marked feature of the stage is the voluminous importation of theories from the West. In this stage the first and many subsequent batches of foreign-language teachers went to study overseas under the auspices of the state. It is designated as theory acquisition because the main thrust of the research of the entire stage is introducing theories from the West to quench the sector's long thirst. We may describe it as one that started with acquisition of a few authoritative theories, then to diverse theories, and finally to multidisciplinary theories. The authoritative theories were Chomsky's generative and transformative linguistics and Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. They dominated the period in an indisputable manner, each with a significant number of loyal followers. Their influence is still strongly felt in China. One important change in this stage is that with the vision of the research being opened up thanks to internationalisation, scholars did not see linguistic study merely as a subsidiary instrument to aid the teaching of a foreign language. The study of a foreign language, say, English, was accepted as legitimate research on its own. Another important development was that under the influence of the theories, scholars started to conduct comparative studies of English and Chinese. Some even tried to use theories from the West to analyse Chinese. Linguistics, as a branch of knowledge, began to assume a degree of autonomy. In this stage there was also cross-disciplinary research that involved the study of language from diversified perspectives with the help of theories from fields such as education, computer science, psychology, sociology and media.

It is almost impossible to single out one or two books or papers that can represent the period among the countless books and papers that were published within 20 years. Granted the shaping influence of the theories from the West, I just enumerate two influential book series that were published for the purpose of introducing the Western theories as testimonies to the substance and scale of the acquisitive push. The first book series was called *Modern Linguistics Series*, with Xu Guozhang as the editor-in-chief, published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in the 1980s and 1990s. Twelve noted Chinese scholars were assigned to write introductions of linguistic theories from the West, spanning a broad spectrum. The list consisted of Gui Shichun's *Psycholinguistics* (1985), Wang Songyan's *Issues in Language* (1985), Xu Liejiong's *Theory of Generative Grammar* (1988), Cheng Yumin's *English Stylistics* (1989), Zhao Shikai's *A Brief History of Linguistics in America* (1989), Miao Jinan's *Semantic Structure and Complement Form in Chinese* (1990), Liu Yongquan's *Applied Linguistics* (1991), Hu Zhuanglin's *Cohesion and Coherence in Text* (1994), Feng Zhiwei's *Computer Processing of Natural Languages* (1996), Wang Dechun's *Neurolinguistics* (1997), Qi Yucun's *Features and Trends in Modern Linguistics* (1997) and Wu Tieping's *Vague Linguistics* (1999).

The other series, titled *Linguistics Textbook Series*, was published by Hunan Education Press in 1988. The series is comparatively small, comprising six books: Wu Qianguang's *Introduction to Semantics* (1988), Wang Gang's *Foundation for General Linguistics* (1988), He Ziran's *A Survey of Pragmatics*

(1988), Huang Guowen's *Essentials of Text Analysis* (1988), Gui Shichun's *Applied Linguistics* (1988) and Qin Xiubai's *Introduction to Stylistics* (1988). Although the series cherished exactly the same objective as the first, i.e. to introduce Western theories to China, it managed to add sections that demonstrate how the theories could be applied to data in Chinese. They managed to demonstrate the applicability of the theories and how the theories could help with research.

These two series offered invaluable help to most teachers who did not have the chance to study abroad in the first 20 years of opening up. The influence and the contribution of these books can never be overestimated because they made the theories accessible and comprehensible to teachers. In a sense we may say they are books of enlightenment.

The multi-disciplinary theory-application stage opened around 1999. The stage can also be testified by a series of books. Symbolically, the *Series of Contemporary Linguistics and Applied Linguistics Research Overseas* was jointly published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and Routledge. Unlike the other two series, this one, which consists of 112 books, is all in the original, with a long introduction written by a Chinese scholar for each, covering 33 branches of linguistics. Halliday prefaced the series, describing the books in it as

a representative selection of up-to-date writing on the most important branches of linguistic studies, by scholars who are recognised as leading authorities in their fields. (2000, F7)

In the preface Wang Zongyan set out the vision and scope of the series:

In selecting books for the series, we are after comprehensiveness, innovativeness, representativeness and prospectiveness. ...While we still accord centrality to the core branches of linguistics and applied linguistics, we will not slight other relevant branches. (2000, F9)

Lu Jianming, a well-known scholar in the Chinese sector, made a similar remark, saying the series was not only an important help to postgraduates but also to teaching and research for the entire linguistics sector in China.<sup>2</sup>

The publication of the books in the original language is also a clear indication that scholars are no longer content to read introductions to theories. They want to have direct dialogue with them. Halliday predicted that the transformational influence of the series will not be restricted to the foreign-language sector. It "will contribute to the development of linguistics as a discipline in Chinese universities and colleges, helping to overcome the divisions into 'English linguistics,' 'Chinese linguistics' and so on, which hinder the progress of linguistics as a unified science" (2000, F7).

With the depth and breadth of the understanding of the Western theories, direct international dialogue via various channels have been conducted. It is in this stage that people began to realise not only the importance but also convenience of theories, for they find that theories provide methodologies as well as theorems or axioms. Theories also proffer perspectives that facilitate the conceptualisation of problems. There emerged two tendencies in the period. One was that the purpose of research was to apply theories newly developed to the Chinese data. In a sense research is turned into a fashion show, evaluating theories not in terms of feasibility but novelty. For instance, in the field of pragmatics, Sperber's and Wilson's relevance theory held sway for some time, but Verschuren's adaptation theory became the vogue. Then the cognitive approach took over to make metaphor the reigning fashion in the field. These fashion-like vicissitudes are borne out by the articles published in the journals.

The other tendency is to adopt a multidisciplinary approach in language research. It is an attempt to explore issues concerning language and its use from multiple perspectives by relying on theories both within and without the domains of linguistics. For instance, theories developed in the fields of cognitive science, education, psychology, sociology and even neuroscience are resorted to in order to account for the complexities of language and its use. It should be stressed here that these certainly are not original attempts but are ones prompted by developments in the West. As indicated by the scope of the book series, it is not an overstatement to say that China is now almost in step with theoretical development in the West.



We can easily find followers of any branch or any trend in linguistic theories in the West. Any budding sign of theorisation or hypotheses will be instantaneously introduced, scrutinised and applied in China.

In a nutshell, in the entire 40 years since opening up began, tremendous progress has been made in foreign-language research that equates to wholesale transformation. It has raised the sector from being a teaching assistant to being an independent researcher, reconnecting the sector intertextually and intersubjectively with the world.

In sum, I suggest we can understand the changes in the following aspects. The first change is the paradigm shift. Research has now evolved from unsystematic case studies about language and language use to systematic theoretical explorations of issues concerning a variety of dimensions of language. In the first 20 years after opening up began classic theories such as Chomsky's and Halliday's exerted indisputable influence. The research procedure at the time generally was that one started with a problem and then tried to find a relevant principle from either of the theories to account for or resolve the problem, whether it was a problem in Chinese, in English or in the teaching of English. However, with the rise of the status of theory and rapid emergence of new theories in the past 20 years, a strong shift in the way researchers depend on theories has appeared. Nowadays many researchers start with a hypothesis or a principle in a new theory, searching for a problem delimited by the theory and then analysing the problem in line with the theory. The procedure has been completely overturned. What matters is not solving a problem but the proof of a theoretical hypothesis. Theories completely dictate research in terms of perspective, formulation of a research question, methodology, relevance of data and analysis. Consequently, research projects are assessed in terms of what they can contribute in theory rather than what they can solve in actuality. Theoretical significance of a project outweighs its practical value.

Second, research objects have been expanded and diversified. Wang and Liu once criticised foreign-language research for its narrow scope:

Some scholars are only keen on reading foreign books and using foreign theories without the slightest interest in issues in their own country. It has never occurred to them that they should apply what they have learnt abroad experimentally so as to test, to amend and complement it. Those who study semantics are only interested in English semantics. Those who study pragmatics only talk about English pragmatics. All they do is to move the foreign lectures to China ... A Chinese scholar can hardly be said to have done his/her job if s/he has never done research on issues related to China or Chinese, with no local data to support it at all. (1995, p. 4)

However, things have taken a decidedly new turn in the past 20 years. Foreign-language research has shifted its focus to Chinese, with growing interest in comparative linguistic study of Chinese and English, in most of which English only serves as the control group, though. Consequently, traditional studies of English syntax, semantics and phonology have suffered a marked decline whereas related research in Chinese has increased significantly. It is no exaggeration to say that issues in Chinese have now become the main objects of research in the foreign-language sector.

Third, research has developed along diverse levels. In the initial stage of the first 20 years after opening up, research was mostly at the syntactical level, with either Chomsky or Halliday at the helm. Scholars gradually realised the importance and the excitement of studying language at diverse levels. Research in the sector has also managed to develop along a cross-disciplinary direction. In the past 20 years, research has thrived at many linguistic levels, including pragmatics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, typological linguistics, corpus linguistics, computer linguistics, cognitive linguistics and neurolinguistics.

Fourth, there are significant changes in methodology. Qualitative research was the mainstay in the first 20 years, with samples of a limited quantity collected in the process of reading, from actual use, or from teaching practices. The traditional introspection approach has all but been abandoned. Experimentation, statistics and corpus are the main methods for testing the validity of research

hypotheses. Quantitative methodology has largely taken over, being a common practice or a required part for research. The increased use of methods from social sciences is the main cause of the thriving growth of linguistic research in foreign-language teaching.

Finally, the change of research objects and multidisciplinary approaches have attracted attention from scholars in other disciplines. Readership has expanded beyond the sector. Nowadays, readers who are interested in foreign-language research are no longer just foreign-language teachers in China. They include scholars of linguistics at home and abroad. The expansion of readership on the one hand indicates that the foreign-language sector no longer simply provides introductions on foreign theories and on the other its efforts to expand its scope of research to Chinese and other related areas have been respected and successful. Over the past 20 years many scholars have won international recognition in their research areas.

#### **4 Problems to be Tackled in Research**

However, the research sector is faced with unprecedented crises similar to those faced by teaching, mainly because of its unique officially granted institutional status, which assigns the mission of foreign-language research to the sector. The following is a brief enumeration of the problems the sector now faces and that need to be tackled.

First, owing to the interaction between the foreign-language sector and linguistics sector overseas, there has emerged an ever-growing tendency for the autonomy of linguistic research, bridging the artificial division that Halliday challenged between English linguistics and Chinese linguistics in order to apply the basic theoretical frameworks of foreign theories to the study of Chinese. Consequently, the study of foreign languages has been nudged to the periphery. In most of the comparative studies, English is only a parameter of a control group. The tendency has been expanding rapidly from the study of phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse and many other areas. The sharp decline in the publications on research of English is the best testimony to the tendency (Li & Xu, 2018). As far as linguistics proper is concerned, there is nothing inadequate about the tendency, but as foreign languages are the officially designated research objects, alignment with Chinese can be problematic given that there is a division of work between Chinese linguistics and foreign-language linguistics in China. The biggest handicap of the present status, to mention but one, is that foreign-language teachers may not have the expertise to evaluate research projects on Chinese, but the institutional division has impeded the participation of the Chinese linguistics sector. So the validity of the research results is questionable when they are not evaluated by specialists in the field. The problem the foreign-language sector has to confront is: Is it adequate for the foreign-language research sector not to study foreign languages in line with the official assignment? Granted the reality, the sector urgently needs to find an institutional solution to the non-academic division founded on the official disciplinary categorisation so as to facilitate interaction between English linguistics and Chinese linguistics.

Second, since research in the sector has strong international connections, researchers who have studied overseas have good international visions for their projects (Li & Xu, 2018) but it is disconcerting to notice that most of the projects just follow and copy those research projects developed overseas with little original adjustment. There is little attempt to examine applicability or develop an independent theory that can resolve the issues and beyond. What has been labeled as Chinese theories are in fact paraphrastic in that only the data in the original research projects have been replaced by the malleable Chinese data with some slight adjustments for dovetailing. Consequently, though many of the academic achievements have been made and published, their value, apart from providing evidence from Chinese, is extremely limited. As Chinese is a language highly flexible in its rules and conventions, one can have easy success if one chooses to iron out the incompatibilities in the Chinese data by selecting what can fit and suit.

The problem with such paraphrasic research is that it is a pseudo-synchronisation with the development of theories overseas. On the other hand, its validity is dubious since it does not critically check applicability and, most seriously, the highly selective manipulation of the data has not only eroded the integrity of research but also ruined scientificity. Much of such research is not academically motivated but arises from the pressures of publication in Chinese universities and the desire for promotion. Under such pressures and with such desires it is not unexpected that researchers will seek expedient ways that promise quick publication.

Third, serious problems underlie the tremendous momentum the cross-disciplinary linguistic research has gained. According to Li's and Xu's survey of Chinese scholars' international publications in the SSCI journals (2018), which covers the period 2000 to 2017, there were on average three papers a year between 2000 and 2008, but 2009 was a turning point, with a boom in publication. Eighteen papers were published that year. According to their figures from 2009 there was a steady increase in publication each year, culminating in more than 50 papers in 2017 (Li & Xu, 2018, p. 31). What they noticed in the survey that accounts for the flourish was the strong growth of cross-disciplinary research.

The basic problem with cross-disciplinary research in the foreign-language sector is that most teachers have not been trained formally in the disciplines concerned except those who have studied abroad. However, even for those trained abroad, many cannot apply what they have learnt abroad to what they are supposed to teach and research when they find jobs in the foreign-language sectors, which, as has been mentioned, belong to a different kind that cannot technically sustain their cross-disciplinary research projects. Thus they have to make do with the limited resources that are inadequate for decent research. The bigger population engaged in cross-disciplinary research has not received the appropriate education. Thus, they lack the qualifications or competence for such research. Take cognitive linguistics and neurolinguistics as an example. Most of the teachers engaged in the research have not received any formal education in related sciences that serve as the precondition for crossing the disciplines. Their research has to be parasitical because of the lack of adequate knowledge and experimental skills. Ill-equipped as I am, I was invited to evaluate cognitive linguistic and neurolinguistic projects on many occasions. To my astonishment, some researchers could not even tell how to judge the validity of the theory they based their research on, and they never considered whether the experiments designed in the theory they relied on were good enough for their projects. The parasitical nature has fatally enervated the validity of their research and the reliability of their experiments' results. To make things worse, sampling in many research projects was not designed and conducted in strict accordance with the principles of research but in line with convenience. A great majority of research projects are not retrievable thanks to the poor control over the variables. The results of many research projects in the sector are generally not acknowledged and honoured by scholars in the relevant fields. Despite the complicated diagrams and sophisticated statistics in the papers, many research projects remind me of the Sokal hoax.

Finally, China's strong development has made it internationally influential. Mostly emboldened by the rise of China, many Chinese scholars are no longer content with adopting theories from the West, doing paraphrasic work. Driven by identity politics and nationalistic sentiment, they propose that China should have a say in the international academic arena. The research sector should develop its own theories or theories with Chinese characteristics in an age of theoretical diversity. The impact of the politicised quest for theories with Chinese characteristics is being palpably felt in the projects of linguistic research. As identity-driven research loaded with nationalistic sentiments is a fundamental violation of the basic spirit and principle of scientific research, I think the tendency is far more counter-productive than productive. It poses a huge risk that may derail normal academic development.

## 5 Conclusion

Foreign-language teaching and research over the past 70 years has not only made enormous progress

that has effectively brought the teaching and research to the normal course of development in line with international standards but has also helped the sectors develop in line with those of their international counterparts. Given the complicated factors that time and again interfere with the development, it cannot be denied that progress has been outstanding.

The sectors have reached a new stage that have a new variety of challenges and problems for them to confront and cope with. Besides the problems we have listed above, there is another more formidable challenge: the rise of nationalistic sentiment that tries to re-politicise teaching and research on the basis of identity politics. To combat the rise, we need to keep in mind that the history of the 70 years' development has informed us of one simple truth: the only way out is to open up to and interact with international counterparts along the academic course. When science is chopped up into nationalist units, what we get at best are political fantasies. When scholars succumb to needs other than academic ones, they have breached the integrity fundamental to research. Nationalism may be good for many things. It is never relevant or conducive to teaching and research.

## Notes

1. This paper is based on a speech at a social function for Chinese linguists at home and abroad organised by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and sponsored by Commercial Press on July 20, 2019. The theme was a celebration of the 70-year development of linguistics in China. The Chinese version was published in the *Chinese Journal of Language Policy and Planning* (2019, 3:71-78). I have made some changes with the English version.
2. Quoted from Huo Qingwen, "The importation and publication of the book series of Contemporary Linguistics and Applied Linguistics Overseas". <http://www.doc88.com/p-3817768505198.html>. Last accessed on July 19, 2019.

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**Weiguo Qu** is a Professor of English at Fudan University, China. He was a Fulbright scholar at the Department of English, Harvard University (2004), and has won quite a few national and municipal awards for his teaching and research. His research interest covers discourse analysis, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, rhetoric and stylistics. Apart from publishing in Chinese, his publications in English include papers that have appeared in *College Composition and Communication*, *Changing English*, *English Today*, *Journal of Language and Intercultural Communication*, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, and books such as *Introducing Argumentation* (2005), *Discourse Stylistics* (2009), *Introducing Critical Thinking and Argumentation* (2013) *Re-orientation: trans-cultural, trans-lingual and trans-media studies in narrative, language, identity and knowledge* (2015), *Politeness in Early Modern England* (2017), etc.