

English's Influence on the Cultural Identity of Chinese People in the Context of Globalization

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Abstract

The widespread of English in the context of globalization places great influence on the cultural identity of mainland China. This paper argues that the influence is not completely negative. China's growing importance in the world may counterbalance English's challenges to Chinese cultural identity, and create a more confident cultural identity in the world with the help of English.

Key words: English; Globalization; Cultural identity; Chinese

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INTRODUCTION

The spreading of English as an international language and as the medium of globalization has great impact on countries all over the world. Globalization increases the flow of thoughts, products, and personnel across the physical boundaries of countries at unprecedented speed, scope, and quantity (Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011). Undoubtedly, in the tide of globalization, countries enjoy greater chances to utilize various types of resources around the world for their own development. It could promote their economy, culture and democracy. The evolving information and communication technologies

have noticeably accelerated the effect of globalization and the use of English; as the primary medium of international communication, English gains increasing popularity in globalization, which is well revealed in the fact that there are over 1 billion non-native English speakers in the world (Alsagoff, 2012, p.109).

English is a two-edged weapon for countries where English is not spoken as the mother language. While it allows these countries to seize development chances and prosperity, it also threatens the vernacular cultures and identities of their people; the negative cultural impact of English has been clearly demonstrated in numerous studies and books (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Bianco, Orton & Gao, 2009; Chen, Benet-Martinez, & Bond, 2008; etc.). The impact of English and globalization on the cultural identity of Chinese has gained much attention in the literature, and many such studies have been conducted with the target groups either as overseas Chinese youth (e.g., McKay & Wong, 1996; Kim & Chao, 2009; Yip, 2009; Kiang, Witkow, Baldeomar, & Fuligni, 2010; Juang & Nguyen, 2010; Hunt, Moloney, & Evens, 2011, etc.) or mainland Chinese youth in urban settings (e.g., Liu, 2011; Nelson & Chen, 2007). These studies indeed reveal some of the impact of English and globalization on the identity development of Chinese youth, but the identity development models used in these studies may not be relevant to the cultural identity development of mainland China as a whole. According to Cheng and Berman (2012), the western "self" and "personal identity" are fundamentally different from their Chinese counterpart, and the identity development models used in previous studies are inappropriate for the general Chinese cultural identity development. Based on their framework of identity development of Chinese, this article aims to explore in general the relationship between English and the cultural identity development of Chinese who are living in the Mainland China.

1. THE CURRENT USE AND STATUS OF ENGLISH IN MAINLAND CHINA

Since China's initial contacts with the English language in the 17th century (Bolton, 2002), Chinese people have been learning English for several centuries. The decades after China's opening-up policy in the late 1970s witness the ever-increasing nationwide enthusiasm for English learning; a figure of 250-350 million users of English is estimated in mainland China (Gil & Adamson, 2011); even though some school leavers may have very limited or even no command of English, this figure itself demonstrates the significance of English in China. The status of English in mainland China is similar to other Asian countries: English is regarded as a "multinational tool" for achieving national goals and an "indispensable resources" for personal achievement (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007, p.18).

The various functions of English in mainland China are summarized into several categories by Gil and Adamson (2011), including the interpersonal function, instrumental function, regulative function and imaginative/ innovative function. These functions make a comprehensive coverage of English use in Chinese society in areas of academic research, media, business, tourism, international connections, formal education, informal education, ideas of expression, etc.. In the broader context of globalization, mainland Chinese people's attitude towards English is similar to that of other Asian countries, a mixture of love and hesitation, due to English's challenge to the preservation of cultural identities and languages (Nunan, 2003). However, mainland Chinese people's use of English is obviously restricted by mainland China's position in the Expanding Circle of Kachru's "Three Circle model" of English speaking countries (1992). Compared to the Inner Circle and Outer Circle, the Expanding circle is the outermost circle, where English use is restricted into limited contexts and purposes (Alsagoff, 2012); in mainland China, English is used as a foreign language for international communication.

Generally speaking, English is mainly used in mainland China for pragmatic purposes. The instrumental function of English in mainland China, summarized by Gil and Adamson (2011), means that English is a medium and a subject of learning at various stages in the educational system of mainland China. From the year 2001, Ministry of Education announced English classes to begin in grade three of primary school; English is a required subject in junior and senior middle schools; in colleges and universities, non-English major students have to study English for one or two years. Despite of the impressive huge figure of English learners, the majority of primary school or middle school English learners are not urban-dwellers, most of whom would have no chance to further their study in colleges and universities due to complex reasons. For these English learners, English means merely

a subject and examinations to pass, and English would become irrelevant to them once they leave school. The same story happens to many university students as well. In a nutshell, English is no more than a required course for the majority of mainland Chinese English learners. For the rest of student English learners in mainland China, English is pursued for specific purses related to their study abroad, career, business or travel.

Students' difference in English performance at school highlights another implicit function of English in mainland China: a judge of talent and value. The English performance in exams plays a critical role in students' enrollment into a higher stage of the study regardless of their real talent in other aspects. English examinations are becoming a serious headache for the public in that English examinations are required for a large number of position promotion, job enrollment, and so on. These positions and jobs may have little to do with English, but individuals involved have to be judged by English whether it is rational or not.

English is also utilized by mainland China as a resource of cultural capital. As many studies show, English is capitalized as a stylistic resource for the promotion of local business. According to Gao's study (2012), the West Street in Yangsuo county, China, transforms itself into a so-called "global village" for domestic tourists partly through capitalizing on English as one semiotic resource. Out of similar purposes, some mainland Chinese fashion shops use English names as a "foreign mask as a way of promotion" among local consumers (Pan, 2010, p.82). On basis of these telling examples, it is safe to say that English is used not just in its communicative terms; it is also used as a symbol of privilege, an effective cultural capital.

2. ENGLISH'S INFLUENCE ON THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF MAINLAND CHINESE

The brief analysis of English's pragmatic functions in mainland China seems to suggest that English has very little, even if any, to do with the cultural being of mainland Chinese. The implicit nature of all languages, including English, is astonishingly complex. Language is not a static entity, merely governed by objective grammatical rules and fixed patterns; recently, language is perceived as "sociocultural practice, a means of meaning-making as well as membership and participation in discourse communities (Alsagoff, 2012, p.104). In other words, language involves the sociocultural participation of the communities of speakers, and it exerts sense of belonging to its speakers and excludes the others. Meanwhile, the language is cultural-driven and dynamic because cultures behind the languages evolve as a result of social practices of the community members; English as a language is not exceptional.

For those who learn to speak English as a foreign language, the learning process is the process of cultural affiliation and the “social and psychological integration” with the native speakers community (Schumann, 1978, p.29; as cited in Alsagoff, 2012, p105). According to socioculturally-oriented SLA researchers who hold the idea that language leaning involves the identity of the learner (Alsagoff, 2012), to learn English is to get the learners’ original cultural identity influenced by the culture, ideologies and value systems of English speaking communities. In more specific words, the culture, ideology and value systems definitely penetrate into the cultural identity of mainland Chinese English learners.

The understanding of fundamental Chinese values, according to Cheng and Berman’s analysis (2012), should be the basis for understanding the Chinese psyche, the foundation of mainland Chinese’s identity. Values such as shame, Confucian philosophy, filial piety and collectivism are the dominant and determinant in the formation and development of mainland Chinese identity. To be more specific, Chinese conception of identity and self emphasizes the “continuity of family, societal roles, the supremacy of hierarchical relationships, compliance with authority, and the maintenance of stability” (Pratt, 1991, p. 285; as cited in Cheng & Berman, 2012, p. 115). Therefore, the mainland Chinese identity is constructed and evolves in the relationship with the family, community, society and the country.

The wide-spreading English unavoidably brings the western culture and values into the life of mainland Chinese, and the globalization fosters their influence in fundamental ways. In essence, western culture and values are Christen-oriented, and highlight individualism, which are fundamentally different from the Chinese values. In general, their influence on mainland Chinese identity could be categorized into two groups: the positive influence and negative influence.

On the one hand, mainland China’s identity and self-esteem as a whole are challenged and transformed by English and the culture and values behind. Since the opening up policy, Chinese young people have been undergoing tremendous value changes, such as “individualism, materialism, and moral crisis” and suffering from a “collective inferiority complex” as a result of the sharp distance between mainland China and the developed western world in terms of national status, economy, technology, and military strength (Wang, 2006, p.233); some young people even feel humiliating to be a Chinese because of the “superiority” of western cultures and national status. Some Chinese even seek to abandon Chinese culture, and embrace the western culture (Zhang, 2008), which is vividly demonstrated in the newly coined term “banana men” (yellow skin with white heart). These feelings challenge their emotional ties with and confidence and pride in their family, society and country.

Meanwhile, the fact that English is a springboard for promotion and chances and it is not equally accessible for all Chinese possesses the danger of further widening the gap between the poor and the rich in mainland China. English is both a matter of educational resources and economic chances for individuals and different areas in mainland China. English is partly responsible for the drastic economic polarization and social unrest, threatening the unity of mainland China’s identity as a whole.

On the other hand, English fosters the cultural awareness of mainland China and enriches the Chinese culture, enabling further development of mainland China’s identity. Even though globalization benefits the very few rule-making countries, globalization through English indeed alters mainland China’s way of confronting the world (Zhang, 2008). The mastery of English allows mainland China unprecedented chances to read the western world, and help mainland China to form their own story of the west against the single story told by the west. Constant contacts with the western world demystify the west culture and values systems; in the confrontation and communication between Chinese culture and social values and these of the west, mainland Chinese gradually form a critical stance, and become more confident about being Chinese. Decades of economic achievement and rise of national status in China raise the self-esteem and confidence of its people, and give mainland China people more opportunities to experience the enjoyment of being a China in the arena of world powers.

Chinese culture is dynamic and all-embracing, ready and confident in absorbing new ideas for its own benefits. The many significant cultural confrontations in the long history of China have been elegantly handled by Chinese culture, and they all became rich ingredients for furthering the booming of Chinese culture. The flourishing of Chinese culture in the Han, Tang and Song dynasties could all be partly explained as the result of direct contact with other cultures. This new wave of cultural confrontation brought in by English has already been resulting in promising progress. This time, Chinese culture booming crosses the Chinese boarder, and flourishes in the whole globe in forms of hundreds of Confucius Institutes, China Towns, Chinese Cultural Festivals, etc.. The cultural identity of China, therefore, faces a new era of development, with a much more prosperous outcome.

CONCLUSION

Even though most other less powerful cultures face serious threats from English, and people living in such cultures suffer from identity crisis, this may not be completely the same to Chinese culture and mainland China’s identity. Globalization brings both challenges and chances and it is an ongoing process rather than

an established fact, a site of struggle between cultures and world powers (Jackson, 2004). The size of Chinese economy, the large population of Chinese speakers, and the efforts of Chinese government in promoting the Chinese culture are all effective driving factors for the preservation and promotion of Chinese culture and the Chinese identity for the whole country. English brings in more chances than threats to the new development of Chinese culture and promotes the Chinese identity to a higher state. English must be fully and critically utilized in the process; otherwise, the Chinese culture and the cultural identity as a whole will have no place to go. This is indeed a perish-or-flourish choice.

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