

Language Education in CHINA

Policy and Experience from 1949

Agnes S. L. Lam

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Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

"At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed."

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

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1

Introduction

Introduction

It has been just over half a century since the People's Republic of China was established in 1949. Its political and economic developments have been well charted by China watchers (Fairbank, 1987; Goodman & Segal, 1991; Howell, 1993; J. Y. S. Cheng, 1998b; Lynch, 1998; S-W. Cheng, 2001; Garnaut & Huang, 2001; Mengin & Rocca, 2002; Laurenceson & Chai, 2003). Its educational achievements have also attracted much research attention (Agelasto & Adamson, 1998; Gu, 2001; Peterson, Hayhoe & Lu, 2001; Turner & Acker, 2002; Yang, 2002; X-F. Wang, 2003).

By comparison, although there are comprehensive accounts of specific aspects of language policy in China such as the standardization of Chinese (Wang, Z-T. Chen, Cao & N-H. Chen, 1995; P. Chen, 1999), the propagation of English in education (Sichuan Foreign Language Institute, 1993; Adamson, 2004) and the development of minority languages (Dai, Teng, Guan & Dong, 1997; M-L. Zhou, 2003), overall accounts of all aspects of language policy in China taken altogether are less readily available, particularly in English. Secondly, while there has been research on aspects such as language attitudes as related to language policy in China (for example, Bai, 1994; Zhou, 2001), there is less research relating policy implementation directly to learners' multilingual experience of policies over a period of time. This is unfortunate in the light of the current trend towards multilingual interpretations of linguistic development, both from the societal perspective as well as the individual learner's point of view (Spolsky, 1986; Edwards, 1994; Paulston, 1994; Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Belcher & Connor, 2001; Singh, 2001; Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). While much is to be learnt from focusing on the development of a particular language or learners' experience of a specific language in China, an overall consideration of all the language policies in China together with the multilingual experience of individual learners can give insights which cannot be arrived at if the language policies or the experiences of learning particular languages are considered separately. A government has to take account of all the languages used in the community

it serves when making language policy because the promotion of one language has effects on the functions of other languages in a community. From the learners' point of view, the learning of one language also affects their learning of other languages. Hence, a multilingual orientation in studying language policy and learner experience is quite necessary. Relating learner experience to policy implementation can also give an appraisal of how effective or feasible a specific policy has been and can point the way to follow-up action. In terms of theory building, such research can provide a bridge between traditional language planning research and the more recent work in the negotiation of learner identity in multilingual settings with reference to learner narratives.

In addition to theoretical concerns related to a multilingual approach to an understanding of the language education circumstances in China among linguists or applied linguists, there is also a practical need among educators in general for a general introduction to language policy and learners' experience in China in view of the vast opportunities for academic exchange between China and the rest of the world. Many of these educators interested in academic interaction with China do not read Chinese and may not have a background in linguistics and so could benefit more from an overall introduction rather than in-depth discussions of specific language policies.

The purpose of this book is therefore threefold: first of all, to provide a multilingual portrayal of language policy in China and, secondly, to study the experience of learners in China as a window to the implementation of such policy, both of which are relevant for theoretical considerations of multilingualism. A third objective is to make such information readily accessible in the form of a general introduction to educators around the world for practical purposes. This composite picture is presented at two levels: at the societal level is an analysis of the policies on the part of the state; at the individual learners' level are accounts of the actual experiences of learners educated from 1949 onwards to give reality to such policies.

In this chapter, the positioning of China in recent history is first reviewed. The educational system in China is then outlined. This is followed by a description of the linguistic scene in China — the languages involved as well as the major policies implemented from 1949. In the last part of the chapter, with reference to studies of multilingualism, the method of data collection and data presentation towards interpretation of the policies is described and the learning biographies of four learners from different age groups and locations in China (and hence different linguistic backgrounds) are presented as an indication of the issues to be explored in greater depth in later chapters.

China in Recent History

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was established on 1 October 1949 after more than two decades of civil strife between the Communist Party and the

Guomindang (Nationalist Party). During part of that time, China was also attacked by Japan. The immediate tasks faced by the new government in 1949 were tremendous. In addition to rebuilding the country, its economy and infrastructure, China was also faced with having to find its place in the international arena (Gray, 1991a, p. 253).

Soviet influence in the early years

Not surprisingly, because of its political inclinations, China was initially hopeful about finding an ally in the Soviet Union and based its development in several areas including its economy and educational system on the Soviet model. A Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance was signed on 14 February 1950 with the Soviet Union (Gray, 1991a, p. 254) allowing the Soviet Union access to some ports and railways in the northeastern region of China in return for aid. But when it became apparent that the Soviet Union was less interested in providing aid to China and more interested in gaining control of parts of China, relations with the Soviet Union took a turn which made it necessary for China to look west as early as the late 1950s.

The Cultural Revolution

By the early 1960s, China was quite ready to further its ties with the West. Unfortunately, events within China in the next few years developed into the most regrettable period of modern China — the Cultural Revolution. It is not uncommon to think that the Cultural Revolution was sparked off by political differences between Mao Zedong and other leaders, with Mao taking the stance of the proletariat while depicting his opponents as revisionist capitalist (MacFarquhar, 1991a, p. 270). Mao was anxious that the revolution in China should continue and not degenerate into another form of capitalism in which the state (instead of landlords in previous times) would exploit the peasants. To prevent this, Mao argued for training 'a new generation of totally dedicated revolutionary successors, whose [world-view] would be genuinely Marxist-Leninist (and by implication, Maoist) — hence the need for a *cultural* revolution' (MacFarquhar & Shambaugh, 1991, p. 270). He found the willing minds and bodies for these new revolutionaries in students. They became Mao's new 'army' — the Red Guards — who could bring down their teachers and other people in power through their denouncement or criticism exercises.

Although ideological issues were at stake, the Cultural Revolution could take off because of dissatisfaction with living conditions. Such dissatisfaction arose because the reforms in the early 1950s took land from the peasants towards collective production, which was not sufficiently well organized so that

coercion was often used to meet production targets. When farmers were encouraged to improve their own living conditions by using their surplus energies to set up small industries in the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, the idealistic movement also degenerated into enforced labour, failing both in economic and ideological terms (Gray, 1991b, p. 266). Inclement weather conditions in 1960 also did not help (Dillon, 1998, p. 122). By the early 1960s, therefore, there was already much unrest within China. So when the Cultural Revolution broke out in the mid-1960s, it was not difficult to persuade the population that certain leaders should be denounced, particularly when critics were already invited to come forward to debate on political issues during the Hundred Flowers Movement initiated in 1956. Once unleashed, however, the forces of the new revolution could not be easily held back and the Cultural Revolution was not officially declared over until Mao's death in September 1976.

Mao, Nixon, Zhou Enlai and Henry Kissinger

Even in the midst of the Cultural Revolution though, two senior statesmen were working hard on the foreign policy front to draw China and America together. They were Zhou Enlai, China's premier from 1949 to 1976, and Henry Kissinger, assistant to the president of the United States of America for national security affairs from 1969 to 1975 and also secretary of state from 1973 to 1977. In Kissinger's own words, 'That China and the United States should seek rapprochement in the early 1970s was ... imposed on each other by their necessities' (1999, p. 139). Richard Nixon, president of the United States at that time, wanted to extricate America from Vietnam and needed to find 'a counterweight to Soviet expansionism' (Kissinger, 1999, p. 139). Mao shared his anxiety about the Soviet threat, particularly after the Brezhnev Doctrine of 1968, which 'proclaimed that Moscow had the right to bring any backsliding Communist state to heel by military force' (Kissinger, 1999, p. 139). In a conversation between Mao and Kissinger in November 1973, subsequent to Nixon's February 1972 visit to China during which Mao already pledged that Chinese troops would not leave Chinese soil, they discussed extensively how the Soviet Union could be contained if Western Europe, China and the United States pursued a co-ordinated course (Kissinger, 1999, p. 149). This policy of active containment of the Soviet Union by both China and the United States was pursued until the early 1980s.

Re-establishing ties with the Russians

By 1982, the Russians were less of a threat as America was determined to pursue military superiority over them and the Soviet Union had to deal with

Afghanistan and other problems abroad while its economy was declining at home. Trade between China and the Soviet Union began to increase. Relations improved further with Mikhail Gorbachev announcing his new view of the Asia-Pacific in 1986 and Sino-Soviet relations were normalized in a summit meeting in May 1989 (Yahuda, 1991, pp. 269–270). (For further details on Gorbachev's reforms and their impact on Sino-Soviet relations, see Lynch, 1998, pp. 129–130.)

Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy

As China regained its importance in the balance of power between America and the Soviet Union, on the domestic front, China was also regaining its momentum for educational and economic developments after the Cultural Revolution. University enrolment resumed in 1978. In the same year, Deng Xiaoping's Policy of Four Modernizations was announced. The need for all-round modernization was first pointed out by Mao in 1963 and the four sectors — agriculture, industry, national defence as well as science and technology — were originally identified by Zhou Enlai in 1964 (MacFarquhar, 1991b, p. 279). This modernization movement soon evolved into the Reform and Opening Policy (Dillon 1998, p. 109). The 1980s saw rapid developments in many areas. In 1982, the communes — farming collectives merged with local governments — were abolished; their political functions were returned to local governments, in principle though not always in practice (Gray, 1991c, p. 267). Foreign experts were invited to visit China. Students and scholars were sent abroad. Fairbank (1987, p. 177), a renowned American China-watcher, observed, 'our increased contact of the 1980s tends as usual to build up the old American feelings about China — the curious appeals of tourism, the hope of big business deals, the respect for the character of Chinese friends and for the intelligence of individual Chinese'. He summed up the period as one of 'disillusioned optimism: China suffers from many evils, but it is a country we can get along with' (Fairbank, 1987, p. 177). For the Chinese too, it was a time of cautious optimism. The Cultural Revolution was still being remembered, and would be until around the mid-1990s, but the very horrors of that age made it unthinkable that it would ever happen again.

China in an international era

China's development would have gone on smoothly if not for the Tiananmen Incident. In June 1989, students demanding reforms demonstrated in Tiananmen Square in Beijing and were overcome by army tanks. The international goodwill gained by China during its gradual opening up in the

1980s suffered a severe setback in the immediate aftermath of the incident. Yet, the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 provided the vacuum for China to re-enter the international arena. China's desire for a rightful place in the world was articulated in her endeavour to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Beijing's bid to host the Olympic Games. Both dreams were realized in 2001. China joined the WTO on 11 December 2001 and will host the Olympics in 2008. The smooth transition of leadership in the central government in 2003 is yet another sign for optimism in China in the new millennium.

From this brief review of the last half century of China's history, three main themes have emerged. China's first priority is to have internal stability and improvement in the living conditions for her people. Where foreign relations are concerned, China is, by and large, consistently non-aggressive and tries hard to maintain peaceable relations with other countries (J. Y. S. Cheng, 1998a, p. 217). Its desire for international recognition has little to do with wanting to control other countries and more to do with not being bullied or humiliated as it was in the century before the present government. In fact, the three tenets of internal progress, peaceful foreign relations and national dignity have, on the whole, been features of Han Chinese rule for thousands of years. In this sense, though the system of government might have changed, the essence has not.

Education in China

Educational developments from 1949 have often been discussed in three periods: before, during and after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In the first period, the Soviet model of socialist reconstruction was adopted. While the primary and secondary education system prior to 1949 (six years of primary school, three of junior secondary and three of upper secondary) was maintained, university education was extended from four years to five years. The socialist planning system produced specialist graduates for the major sectors and the overall educational level of the population was raised during this time. During the second period, the educational system was streamlined with primary education reduced to five years, secondary education to four years and higher education to three years. The greatest disruption during the Cultural Revolution was in higher education as regular universities were closed down and academic research was discredited. The last period has seen modernization and reform and educational expansion at all levels. The system of education changed back to six years of primary school, three of junior secondary, three of senior secondary and four of higher education. Education for the first nine years was also made compulsory (Hayhoe, 1991, pp. 117–119).

Nowadays, the overall picture is promising. Compared to the figures in 1949, statistics from the Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China [MOE] (n.d.) for the year 2002 are impressive (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Education in China

<i>Year</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>No. of institutions</i>	<i>No. of students</i>
1949*	Primary education	280,930	24,400,000
	Secondary education	5,216	1,300,000
	Higher education	205	116,504
2002	Primary education	456,900	121,567,100
	Junior secondary education	65,600	66,874,300
	Senior secondary education	32,800	29,081,400
	<i>Subtotal</i>	98,400	95,955,700
	Regular higher education	1,396	9,033,600
	Adult higher education	607	5,591,600
	<i>Subtotal</i>	2,003	14,625,200

* 1949 statistics are based on Gardner & Hayhoe (1991, p. 116). Other statistics are based on the Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China (n.d.).

As a whole, since 1949, there has been greater participation in education across all levels. The greatest gains have been made in secondary and higher education. There are now nineteen times as many secondary schools and ten times as many higher education institutions; correspondingly, the number of secondary school students and that of students in higher education have increased 74 times and 126 times respectively. As China modernizes, higher education is more than ever seen to be the key to improvement in the standard of living. Nowadays, university education at the initial level appears to be more available but graduate level education is still very competitive. To estimate from 2002 statistics (MOE, n.d.), of 22,818,200 students enrolling into junior secondary school, only 11,807,400 (52%) are likely to enrol into senior secondary education later. Of those enrolling into senior secondary, only 5,428,200 (46%) are likely to enrol into higher education at the initial level later — 3,205,000 (27%) into regular higher education and 2,223,200 (19%) into adult higher education. Of all those enrolling into some form of higher education at the initial level, only 202,600 (4%) may find a place at graduate level. The cumulative effect of these enrolment statistics is that about 1 in 7 (14%) Junior Secondary 1 students can hope to enter a regular higher education institution and 1 in 100 (1%) of this same cohort can become a graduate student. In addition to these enrolment trends, another phenomenon that should be highlighted is the discrepancy in educational conditions between rural and urban areas. This is not just a matter of equal opportunity

but is a possible cause of social unrest if the gap in educational conditions, and hence economic prosperity, is not minimized. With the gradual decline in the birth rate, and hence the streamlining of primary education, perhaps better conditions can be envisaged for future generations.

Language Policies in China

China is a multilingual and multidialectal country. For the majority language group, the Han Chinese, there are two main groups of dialects: the northern dialects and the southern dialects. The northern dialects can be subdivided into seven sub-groups and the southern dialects into six sub-groups (Huang, 1987, pp. 33–45). In addition, among the fifty-five ethnic minorities, over 80 to 120 languages are used (State Language Commission, 1995, p. 159; Zhou, 2003, p. 23). The official language in China is Chinese. The standard dialect, Putonghua, maps well onto the written form of modern Standard Chinese. Various foreign languages have been taught in China at different times. Of primary importance was Russian in the 1950s. Thereafter, English has been taught as the most important foreign language. Other foreign languages of secondary importance in China include Japanese, German, French and other languages for diplomatic purposes. At Beijing Foreign Studies University, for example, over thirty foreign languages are taught.

Since its establishment, the People's Republic has implemented and maintained three main language policies:

1. The standardization of Chinese
2. The propagation of English
3. The development of minority languages

The standardization of Chinese

The standardization of Chinese took a two-pronged approach: in the script and in the pronunciation. In 1954, discussion on the simplification of the script was initiated. This was motivated by the hope that simplified characters would help to improve literacy rates. In 1956, the First Character Simplification Scheme was announced. It was confirmed in 1964 and reaffirmed in 1986. The Scheme contained 2,235 simplified characters and fourteen radicals (a radical is part of a Chinese character). The year 1956 also saw the directive that all schools for Han Chinese should teach in Putonghua. Workshops to train teachers were organized. To facilitate the learning of a standard pronunciation based on Putonghua, a phonetic alphabet, *hanyu pinyin*, was publicized in 1958. (For details of these changes, see State Language Commission, 1996.) Although Chinese dialects share one writing script, they can be quite different in pronunciation, word order for some phrases, particles

and vocabulary. The northern dialect groups share more similarity in pronunciation though differences in tone and vocabulary still exist while the southern dialect groups are more dissimilar from each other. Since the standard dialect, Putonghua, is a northern dialect, native speakers of the southern dialects have the greater learning task when developing their competence in Putonghua. (See Chapter 2 for details.)

The propagation of English

When the People's Republic was established, Russian was the most important foreign language for a short period. Many people have the impression that the learning of English was promoted only after the Cultural Revolution. In reality, English was accorded importance in China soon after relations with the Soviet Union became tense in the mid-1950s. As early as 1957, a draft syllabus for teaching English in junior secondary school was distributed. In 1961, the syllabus for English majors at university and college level was defined. There were also some foreign language schools established in China from 1960 to 1965. Even during the dark years of the Cultural Revolution, Zhou Enlai managed to deploy a remnant of foreign language majors to posts requiring foreign language expertise. In 1971, China replaced Taiwan in the United Nations and, as mentioned earlier, in 1972, Richard Nixon's visit to China cleared the way for exchange between China and America. After the Cultural Revolution was over and university admission resumed in 1978, more attention was paid to English for non-English majors and English in schools. With Deng Xiaoping's Policy of Four Modernizations announced in the same year, the prominence of English escalated and has not abated since (Lam, 2002a). (See Chapter 3 for details.)

The development of minority languages

The total minority population of 106,430,000 constitutes only about 8.4% of the total population in China (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2001), but they live in a widespread area of about 64% of the total area of China (Dai et. al., 1997, p. 10). Literacy plans for the minorities, previously referred to as nationalities, are therefore not easy to implement. Before 1949, twenty of the fifty-five minorities already had a written form for their languages. From the 1950s to the 1980s, about half of them had new orthographies added or had their existing scripts revised; in addition, new scripts were created for another nine ethnic groups. The adoption of the Roman alphabet for several new orthographies was in line with the use of *hanyu pinyin* to propagate Putonghua (State Language Commission, 1996, p. 16). Although the minorities, apart from the cadres and teachers, have not been

required to learn Putonghua, they have been encouraged to become bilingual in their own language as well as Putonghua, particularly in recent years (State Language Commission, 1996, p. 37). For minority groups small in numbers, educational or economic advancement may be possible only if they become proficient in Chinese. (See Chapter 4 for changes in policy during different periods.)

Except during the Cultural Revolution when many scholarly activities and cultural practices were repudiated, by and large, the three policies have been consistently implemented throughout the last half century. In spite of the prevailing policy directions, learners educated in different time periods and in different locations would have had different experiences. (This section was adapted from Lam [2002b]. See Gu [1997] and Gu and Hu [2002] for other sources on language policy in China.)

The Language Education in China Project

China being so vast and parts of the terrain being not easily accessible, it is difficult to implement language policy to the same degree across the country. Other obstacles are the enormous size of the population, insufficient financial resources and the fact that many dialects are spoken among the majority population, the Han Chinese, and a multitude of languages are spoken among the minorities. To investigate into how language policies had been experienced by learners educated in different time periods, the Language Education in China (LEDChina) project was conducted. This section outlines the project logistics and objectives, the research instruments, the data collection procedures, the type of participants and the limitations in the study.

Project logistics and objectives

The LEDChina project was supported by a grant of HK\$800,000 from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The grant was mainly used to support a research assistant who was employed specifically for the project for three years and two months from January 1999 to February 2002. As I was teaching full-time at the University of Hong Kong throughout the project, all the field trips were conducted during my leave. The main research objective was to relate language policy changes to the experience of learners in China. It was necessary therefore to identify learners at different ages to participate in the study. In addition to age as the main variable for estimating policy changes as experienced by learners in different time periods, other factors considered in different parts of the project were the learners' first dialect or language (particularly for the learning of

Putonghua) and whether their birthplace was in a coastal region or the interior (particularly for the learning of English or the first foreign language).

Research instruments

The approach taken was both quantitative and qualitative. Questionnaires were designed to arrive at an overall picture of learner experience; there was one version for Han Chinese learners (Appendix I) and another adapted version for learners from minority language groups. The learner survey questionnaire included sections on: biographical background, learning Putonghua, learning other Chinese dialects, learning minority languages, learning the first foreign language and learning other foreign languages. In addition, case interviews were conducted for selected respondents on their learning experience; again, there was one version of interview questions for Han Chinese learners (Appendix II) and another for minority language learners. The interview questions were designed to encourage the interviewee to talk freely as the objective of the interviews was to arrive at a biographical understanding of the interviewee's language experience. Such use of learning narratives is in line with the current interest in learning biographies as a research tool (for example, Chamberlayne, Bornat & Wengraf, 2000; Belcher & Connor, 2001, pp. 3–4). While the focus of the study was on the experience of learners, some discussions were also held with heads of language programmes (or their representatives) to find out how language teaching was organized in China more recently at primary, secondary and university level; six versions of these interview questions were used, one for each level (primary, secondary and university) and for each language (Chinese and English and, at university level, other foreign languages as well); (see Appendix V for a sample). To gather background information for these interviews, a questionnaire was also designed; again, six versions were prepared (see Appendix III and Appendix IV for samples). Putonghua was used in the collection of oral data and Chinese was used in the collection of written data. The samples included as appendices in this book were translated from Chinese.

Data collection procedures

The points of entry for data collection were the universities. Most of the universities surveyed or visited were key universities or the only universities in the respective cities. The schools visited were the primary and secondary schools on their campuses. If a university chosen as a fieldwork location did not have its own secondary school or primary school, the contact person at the university hosting the research team would identify a substitute school fairly near to the university campus, where members of university staff were likely

to send their children to. Such procedures of choosing fieldwork locations ensured that the institutions participating in the study were among the best ones in the respective cities, which made it a little more possible to have some comparison of learners from different regions. To protect the privacy of the informants, the exact locations are not specified in the discussion of the data. This is because in some locations, there was only one key university or just one university and hence only one department head of Chinese and one/two department heads of foreign languages. A narrative on a learner recruited through the university also gives very specific information about the interviewee's age and career path. So it would have been quite easy to deduce who the informants were if the locations had been identified.

The initial survey data collection was conducted by post and interviews of learners as well as discussions with heads of language programmes were conducted during field trips to a northern coastal city, a southern coastal city, a northern interior city and a southern interior city, with some supplementary interviews of learners conducted in another northern interior city. Cities in provinces adjacent to the sea were classified as coastal cities. For example, Xiamen, located in Fujian, a province adjacent to the sea, was classified as a coastal city and Lanzhou, located in Gansu, was classified as an interior city. 'Northern' and 'southern' refer to north or south of the line posited between northern Chinese dialect regions and southern Chinese dialect regions (Map 1).



Map 1 Northern and Southern Chinese dialects
Based on Ramsey (1987, Figure 5) & Huang (1987, p. 33–45).

Participants in the study

As the types of respondents required for the study were rather specific, it took several attempts in about two-and-a-half years to achieve a good data pool on:

1. the learning experience of Han Chinese
2. the experience of learners from ethnic minorities
3. the perspectives of language programme providers

Han Chinese learners: For the main part of the study involving Han Chinese learners, through contact persons based in twenty-four universities and another twenty-three individuals, 739 questionnaires were sent out and 460 questionnaires were returned. Of those returned, 415 were usable. These 415 respondents were classified into five age groups: 46 to 50, 41 to 45, 36 to 40, 29 to 35 and 24 to 28, according to their age in the year 2000. The years these groups of learners entered primary school correspond roughly to the phases of historical change in China. Learners were also categorized according to the location of their birthplace into 'northern coastal', 'southern coastal', 'northern interior' and 'southern interior'. Their age, dialect and location information are summarized in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Age, dialect and location of Han Chinese respondents

<i>Location</i>	<i>Number of respondents (Percentage)</i>					<i>Total</i>
	<i>24 to 28</i>	<i>29 to 35</i>	<i>36 to 40</i>	<i>41 to 45</i>	<i>46 to 50</i>	
Northern coastal	29 (7.0%)	21 (5.1%)	12 (2.9%)	19 (4.6%)	20 (4.8%)	101 (24.3%)
Southern coastal	21 (5.1%)	22 (5.3%)	11 (2.7%)	16 (3.9%)	10 (2.4%)	80 (19.3%)
Northern interior	53 (12.8%)	53 (12.8%)	33 (8.0%)	20 (4.8%)	19 (4.6%)	178 (42.9%)
Southern interior	14 (3.4%)	9 (2.2%)	14 (3.4%)	13 (3.1%)	6 (1.4%)	56 (13.5%)
Total	117 (28.2%)	105 (25.3%)	70 (16.9%)	68 (16.4%)	55 (13.3%)	415 (100.0%)

Note: 'Northern' and 'Southern' refer to north and south of the dialect line and 'Coastal' and 'Interior' refer to whether the birthplace of the respondent was in a province adjacent to the coast.

Of the 415 respondents, 196 (47.2%) were male and 218 (52.5%) were female with 1 (0.2%) respondent not indicating his/her sex; 153 (36.9%) were born in a rural area and 235 (56.6%) in an urban area with 27 (6.5%) not indicating whether their birthplace was rural or urban; 97 (23.4%) were from the Chinese

language profession; 193 (46.5%) were from the foreign language profession; 76 (18.3%) were teaching other subjects and 49 (11.8%) had another occupation. To minimize any skewing of the data, respondents from the Chinese language profession were excluded from the data pool in the analysis of the average university graduate's experience of learning Chinese in Chapter 2; likewise, respondents from the foreign language profession were excluded from the data pool in the analysis of the average university graduate's experience of learning foreign languages in Chapter 3. In addition to questionnaire data, interviews were conducted with thirty-five Han Chinese learners. This number of interviewees is comparable to the study of thirty-two ethnic students in Lee (2001).

Learners from the ethnic minorities: A small parallel study on learners from the minorities was also conducted. Through contact persons in four institutions and another five individuals, 133 questionnaires were sent out and 95 were returned. Of those returned, sixty were valid. Their age information is summarized in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 Age of learners from minority language groups

<i>Age</i>	<i>Number of respondents (Percentage)</i>
24 to 28	12 (20.0%)
29 to 35	17 (28.3%)
36 to 40	14 (23.3%)
41 to 45	10 (16.7%)
46 to 50	7 (11.7%)
Total	60 (100.0%)

Of the sixty respondents, forty (66.7%) were male and twenty (33.3%) were female; forty-two (70.0%) were born in a rural area and eleven (18.3%) in an urban area with seven (11.7%) not indicating whether their birthplace was rural or urban. As respondents differed greatly in their first languages and the number of respondents was small, the information thus collected was mainly used as background information to cross-check with interview data. Interviews conducted with seventeen learners from various minority groups proved more fruitful.

Heads of language programmes: Requests for language programme information were also sent to 105 heads of language programmes. Of the seventy-one who responded, sixty-nine provided usable information (Table 1.4).

Table 1.4 Heads of language programmes

<i>Type of institution</i>	<i>Number of respondents (Percentage)</i>		
	<i>Chinese language programme</i>	<i>Foreign language programme</i>	<i>Total</i>
Primary school	10 (14.5%)	9 (13.0%)	19 (27.5%)
Secondary school	9 (13.0%)	9 (13.0%)	18 (26.1%)
University	12 (17.4%)	20 (29.0%)	32 (46.4%)
Total	31 (44.9%)	38 (55.1%)	69 (100.0%)

Each respondent was reporting on how the teaching of Chinese or English/foreign languages was organized at his/her institution at a specific level of education — primary, secondary or university. The information from these respondents was used as background information to prepare for interviews of heads of programmes at each level and for each language during field trips. Eventually, on-site discussions were held with twenty-nine programme respondents.

Limitations in the study

These various means of data collection provided first-hand information for the understanding of the three language policies in China. The main limitation in this study is that all the learners surveyed or interviewed were university graduates. This was necessary as the purpose of the study was to track the learning experience of the same learners through all levels of education in China. Another limitation is that most of the respondents in the learner survey were teachers. These two limitations need to be kept in mind in the interpretation of the data as the picture that has emerged is probably more representative of academically successful learners. In a report on minority students at a university in China (Lee, 2001), the argument is made that the study of those who make it to university may empower the next generation of learners more than documenting the experience of learners who fail to do so. There is some truth in that argument although most of the learners in the present study seem to have successes as well as failures at different stages of their lives and for learning different languages or dialects, all of which may be useful for teachers and learners to know. Another advantage of studying the sample in the present study is that the participants understood more easily the nature of research and co-operated more readily. In any case, during the time the participants in the present study were within the educational system, the historical policy changes they experienced as learners, the focus of this study, would have been similar to those experienced by learners not included

in the study, granted, of course, that there would have been individual and regional variation which would surface in the interviews.

A Multilingual Approach to Language Education

Before the presentation of some project data for discussion, it is useful to first identify the central issue and methodological concerns in the multilingual approach adopted in this study.

With around 5,000 languages in the world used in about 200 countries (Crystal, 1987, p. 360), multilingualism is in reality very widespread. Not surprisingly, therefore, multilingual orientations to understanding language education circumstances in various countries have gathered momentum in the last two decades. One of the earliest international academic gatherings devoted to the study of multilingualism was the first Symposium organized in 1984 by the AILA (International Association of Applied Linguistics) Scientific Commission on Language and Education in Multilingual Settings (Spolsky, 1986, p. 1). Other works which have appeared in the last several years include Edwards (1994), Paulston (1994), Cenoz and Genesee (1998), Belcher and Connor (2001), Singh (2001), Herdina and Jessner (2002) and Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004).

A central issue in multilingual settings is the availability of education in and through the mother tongues of learners with different home languages (Spolsky, 1986, p. 1; Nunan & Lam, 1998, p. 121) and how taking advantage of such provision may or may not empower learners to have total personal fulfilment within the national milieu. This is a concern both for the state as well as individual learners from social strata or ethnic groups with little access to power or status in a multilingual or multidialectal society. It is a dilemma because learning the language or dialect of the dominant group may result in less competence in one's own language or dialect, variously discussed as language shift (Paulston, 1994, p. 38; Nunan & Lam, 1998, p. 121), language loss, language deterioration and/or attrition (Herdina & Jessner, 2002, pp. 93–98), but not learning the dominant language may result in social marginalization. Among more recent work, a more optimistic note is struck in the emphasis on the dynamic learning biographies of individual learners who have achieved some measure of multilingual abilities (Belcher & Connor, 2001) or the model of continuous negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Such research seems to point to more possibilities for achieving individual multilingualism or recreating multilingual selves. However promising these newer conceptions about individual multilingualism may be, the issue remains that governments and learners in multilingual settings have to make choices concerning linguistic development which are guided by societal considerations and which will have social implications.

A land of many languages and dialects, China is also faced with making linguistic choices; so are learners in China. Focusing on one language or dialect means less learning resources for others. Interestingly enough, language policy making in China tends to be compartmentalized with different administrative units taking charge of Chinese language matters, foreign language education and language minorities affairs; hence competition for national support for these areas of work is apparently less direct. At the individual level, the language experience of learners in China is certainly not linguistically discrete; each learner tends to be exposed to more than one language and more than one dialect. Hence, a multilingual approach is quite essential for an appreciation of the realities of language education in China.

A multilingual orientation in data collection and presentation can offer insights which are less readily available than when the learning experience of each language is considered discretely. While it may be less feasible to review all the language policies in China synchronically in the same breath, it is entirely possible and appropriate to present individual learning experiences of any particular language against the multilingual background of each learner. In this book, therefore, the tracking of policy measures and the analysis of survey data will focus on one language at a time while the interview data on learners will be presented compositely, that is, with the experiences of all the languages in a learner's repertoire mentioned, however briefly. For example, in Chapter 2 on the learning of Standard Chinese, the policy review will focus on the standardization of Chinese and the survey data will focus on the overall learning experience of Chinese by learners; but in the learning biographies focused on learning Standard Chinese, each learner's experience of other Chinese dialects or foreign languages will also be mentioned briefly so that the reader can reflect on the learner's success or failure of learning Standard Chinese with reference to the interviewee's multilingual or multidialectal experience.

Another feature of the presentation of the learning biographies in this book is that instead of grouping fragments of different learners' experience under central themes, each learner's experience is first integrally presented as individual learning biographies before they are discussed as a whole. (To minimize overlap between stories, the biographies presented were carefully selected from the pool of data and very much abridged.) This presentation mode is adopted so that the reader can have a more vivid and realistic picture of learners from different backgrounds as individuals trying to define their own learning selves in a multilingual and/or multidialectal context. Other recent examples of a similar method of presenting learning biographies are found in Belcher and Connor's (2001) *Reflections on Multiliterate Lives*, Turner and Acker's (2002) *Education in the New China: Shaping Ideas at Work* and some articles in Benson and Nunan's (2002) *The Experience of Language Learning*.

Four Learners' Experiences

As mentioned earlier, the policy shifts at different times as well as the linguistic variation in China have resulted in a range of language learning circumstances. As an indication of the differences in learning experiences, here are excerpts from interviews of four learners from different backgrounds. The age specified was that of the interviewee in 2000. Pseudonyms are used (and will be in all references to interview data later). The four learners, from the oldest to the youngest, are:

1. Lian: Southern Chinese from the coastal region, female, aged 50, a library administrator
2. Wei: Northern Chinese from the interior region, male, aged 38, a mathematics/philosophy teacher
3. Bao: Zhuang minority, male, aged 32, a news agency editor
4. Shan: Northern Chinese from the interior region, female, aged 26, a Chinese language teacher

Lian (Southern Coastal Chinese Interviewee 34, female, aged 50, a library administrator)

Background: I was born in the city in the Wuyi county in Zhejiang in 1950. In 1958, when I was seven or eight, I entered primary school. In 1964, I entered junior secondary school, also in the same county. After that, I enrolled in a technical college but when the Cultural Revolution began, classes were cancelled. So in 1968, I started working in a textile factory. Then from 1973, I worked in a company producing salted eggs and century eggs. In 1984, I came to Guangxi. I first worked in the Nationalities Research Institute as an information officer. In 1985, I studied political education at this university [in the southern interior of China] and graduated in 1988. I now work in the library of the university.

The Wuyi dialect: There are eleven dialects in Zhejiang. Every county has a different dialect. Most people can understand five or six of them. My first dialect is the Wuyi dialect. The dialects in that county are very special. That county was like a 'dialect island'. People who could speak that dialect were all in that county. There were very few speakers. Outside that county, people could not understand that dialect. My husband can also speak my dialect because he grew up in Zhejiang. My child, born in Wuyi, also learnt this dialect. Now my child is working in Wuhan. When we talk on the telephone or go out together, we speak this dialect and we can keep our conversations secret because people around us cannot understand it. When I visit my maiden home, I also speak the Wuyi dialect.

Learning Putonghua: I learnt Putonghua when I was growing up in the county because everyone spoke Putonghua in the city then. I did not have to learn Putonghua purposely. The teachers at the school also used Putonghua because they were from different parts of China. It was like that in primary school and also in secondary school. In the technical college that I attended, Putonghua was also used as the medium of instruction because the college was for the whole province. Students came from all over the province, so they could only communicate in Putonghua. I never felt any difficulty in learning Putonghua because I used it from Primary 1.

Switching between Putonghua and other dialects: Among colleagues at my present workplace, Putonghua is spoken. Sometimes they speak Baihua [the dialect spoken in her present location in Guangxi] with each other, but when there are visitors from another place coming here to discuss something, they will use Putonghua. I can understand Baihua because when the locals chat with each other, they speak Baihua. I cannot speak Baihua well and do not enjoy speaking it. My husband's family is in Wuhan. When we visit them, I speak Putonghua. They can understand me. When they speak the Wuhan dialect, I can understand them too though I cannot speak it well. I also understand the Sichuan dialect and the Guiliu dialect a little because I often go to villages to do research. In the villages, if you do not understand their dialects, it is very hard to collect information.

Learning English: I learnt English from junior secondary school. After that, I learnt on my own through the correspondence course supported by television broadcasts. I studied at a television university for two years from 1989 to 1990. I also used the cassette recorder to listen to tapes and bought books to read. It was a very dead way to learn. I could understand a little, remember some words. My English was good for examinations. In those days, the teacher's standard was rather low. Her own English was not too good so she could not teach well. Few people learnt English well. To learn well, you have to rely on yourself. We are assessed very often, for example, for promotion at our workplace. If you do not study, it will not do. I was already assessed twice for promotion, five years between each assessment. If you want to be promoted again, then you need to be assessed again. If you do not want promotion, then you will not be assessed. On the mainland, a lot of us study for the purpose of assessment.

Importance of interaction: The environment affects learning particularly. If you are living in a certain language environment, even if you do not specially work hard at learning a language, you will still be influenced and learn some of it. If you pay attention in addition and try to learn it intentionally, you will learn fast. If you do not have that environment, even if you try very hard to learn, you will still have a huge obstacle. It is like my learning of English. I can listen to tapes, read books, memorize words but without the opportunity to interact, it is very difficult for me to improve. When I have learnt the

language to a certain level and I have mastered a certain amount of vocabulary. I know what it means and I can understand what I read but I cannot speak it. The best way to learn a language is to have a combination of someone teaching you and someone to practise communication with you. I do not have the opportunity to practise or interact. So my oral language cannot improve. It is rather difficult to find someone to interact with me in English. There are many foreign language teachers in our university but they are all busy with their own work. You will not feel good about taking up their time.

English in Hong Kong: I was in Hong Kong once. I was on an exchange programme at the Chinese University in April 2000. When I met students, they all spoke Cantonese or English. Since I could not speak Cantonese well, when I had to ask them questions about certain matters, I could only use English. My English was rather rusty but under those circumstances, I was forced to use it. After a period of time, I was better and felt there was much improvement. When I meet a foreigner, we must speak English. So even if I cannot speak English well, I must still speak it. So environment affects learning very much.

English in France: In September 2000, I was also in France to do research on the Yao and Miao ethnic groups [ethnic minorities from China] living in France. The first generation of these groups there could still speak some Chinese but their second generation could only speak French and some of them could speak a little English. Since I could not speak French, we could only communicate in English. I could also buy things and ask for directions in English. The environment forced me to improve. I was very happy about it. Language could help me solve problems. If you are travelling and do not speak English at all, you will not dare to go and buy things. You are like a dumb person. Some of the people who went with me were older and could not speak English. They did not even dare to buy anything. So I could only be brave and went to shop for them. They were very grateful to me.

Wei (Northern Interior Chinese Interviewee 31, male, aged 38, a mathematics and philosophy teacher)

Background: I was born in Tongwei in Gansu in 1962. I grew up in a rural area and completed my primary and secondary education there. In 1979, I enrolled in a teacher training university in the provincial capital and graduated in 1983. Upon graduation, I taught mathematics in a teachers' training college in Dingxi, a small city, for five years. In 1988, I came to this university [in the northwestern region] to do my master's degree. Since I graduated in 1991, I have been teaching mathematics and philosophy at this university.

The Tongwei dialect: The dialect I know best is of course the Tongwei dialect because I grew up in my home village. I learnt this dialect from my

parents. This should be considered my mother tongue because I could speak it from a young age. Dingxi was near my home so I could speak the Dingxi dialect too, which was similar to the Tongwei dialect. I can learn my dialect well because it was spoken all around me.

Putonghua: I did not learn Putonghua very well. I also learnt it from my parents but all along, I could not speak it well. The teachers in my primary and secondary schools did not use Putonghua to teach, not even in Chinese lessons. My classmates and I did not use Putonghua for interaction. Only when I went to university at the provincial capital in 1988 did I learn Putonghua. That was because the students came from all over the country and they could not understand my dialect. Actually in class, we were required to use Putonghua but I did not make much effort in learning it well at school. So at university, I had to learn it on my own from listening to broadcasts and listening to other people speaking in Putonghua. Because I teach mathematics and philosophy here, the teaching involves the disciplinary knowledge more. So even if my Putonghua is not so good, the effect is not so great. It is quite difficult to learn Putonghua when a person has grown up.

English: I learnt a little English. I learnt some words. A few days ago, some visitors from overseas came to visit our department and basically we could communicate about academic matters, not very well, but we could interact. My father at first did not know any English. He was a farmer. But my grandfather was a *ju²ren²* [a person who passed the local qualifying examination in the civil service examinations in imperial China] in the Qing dynasty. So my father studied a lot under my grandfather. Later, my father studied English by himself. He could read English books but could not pronounce the words. So from a young age, I liked English because I was influenced by my father. At university, I liked English particularly. Perhaps that was why I spent more time on it. I relied on self-study because, in those days, the standard of English teaching was rather low. At university, we were using a series of books produced by Nankai University but those were more suitable for developing professional English. At that time, I wanted to learn English more widely. So I studied the set of books by Xu Guozhang by myself. In my third year at university, I became interested in English literature and read a series on English literature. I also read a poetry anthology including the poetry of Byron. That was the first book I read in English by myself. Now I have basically no problem in reading English but writing is very difficult, very difficult. I am still continuing to learn. I hope I can write academic papers in English and publish internationally. That would be best.

Russian: I also studied Russian when I was at university but I have forgotten almost all of it now. If I use a dictionary, I can still read some Russian books.

Learning languages: I think not having an environment to use the language is the greatest obstacle. Learning a language takes a lot of time. It is definitely not enough just to depend on the teacher. It demands a lot of work

by ourselves and is a matter of self-study. It does not matter which method you use to learn as long as you practise more, read more, listen more, write more, speak more and interact more.

Policy recommendations: Universities should be stricter. If you cannot pass the Band 4 examination [the national examination for university students in China; more details in Chapter 3], you cannot get your degree. But that is not strict enough. The environment for using English creatively is also inadequate. For example, the television broadcast time in English is not long enough. Putonghua learning should also be a long-term policy. It is best to force people to learn it when they are young. A person who cannot speak Putonghua well should not be a teacher. The policy should be more strictly implemented in primary school and then secondary school. At university, we could be more relaxed about this because many students already know Putonghua by the time they get to university. In the cities, they have television and radio broadcasts and children generally can speak Putonghua. Those who cannot speak Putonghua well are from the rural areas. The state should send better university graduates to the rural areas or pay teachers there better and should develop the vast rural areas. If the economy and the living conditions in the rural areas are better and we can attract better teachers there, then children from rural areas will learn better. Even nowadays, educational conditions in rural areas are still very bad.

Bao (Minority Interviewee 15, male, aged 32, a news agency editor)

Background: I was born in 1968 in a small city in the Debao *xian*¹ [county] in Guangxi. In 1975, I entered primary school and in 1980, I entered secondary school also in Debao. In 1986, I left for Guangzhou to study at the university specializing in economics and international trade. Upon graduation in 1990, I came to [a city in the southern interior] to work at the Guangxi branch of the China Commodities Inspection Bureau (CCIB) until 1995. Thereafter, I worked at two commercial companies before I joined the news agency in 1999 to work as an editor on international current affairs.

The Zhuang language: I learnt the Zhuang language from speaking it at home from birth. It was very natural for me. In primary school, the teachers would usually speak Putonghua in class. If we did not understand any Chinese words in class, the teacher would also provide explanations in the Zhuang language and would also converse with us in the Zhuang language outside class. My friends and I would speak in the Zhuang language because most of the people living in that area spoke that language.

Putonghua: In secondary school, not all the teachers came from the local area. Some were not from the Zhuang minority group. They all taught in Putonghua. All of us could basically understand Putonghua and there was no

need to teach us in the Zhuang language any more. We would speak Putonghua with the teachers even outside the classroom but continued to speak the Zhuang language with our classmates. Apart from classes, there was little opportunity to learn Putonghua. There was no television in those days. But Putonghua movies influenced me a lot. I remember being carried by adults to go to Putonghua movies. I could not understand most of it but I remember the screen shots and bits of the stories. When I was in Primary 4, around 1978 or 1979, because of the war in Vietnam, many Chinese soldiers would come to our district. We would meet these soldiers and they would ask us for directions and we would have to reply in Putonghua. So there was a chance to speak it. I also began to listen to Putonghua radio broadcasts from Senior Secondary 1. That improved my Putonghua a lot. But because we lived in the Zhuang district, my Putonghua was not quite complete. Even in senior secondary school, when I met vocabulary I did not understand, there was no one to ask because the people sitting near me were also Zhuang people and were in the same situation. Several of the phrases came from the north but we had not lived in the north before. So we could not understand them.

Chinese literature at university: Only when I went to university did my Putonghua become perfect. At university, there were classmates from many different provinces. When I heard them using different phrases, slowly I understood their meanings. In my first year at university, we also had Chinese lessons twice a week for a year. We studied classical Chinese literature. Unfortunately, our teacher was an old lady whose Putonghua was very poor. She tried to teach in Putonghua but used a lot of Cantonese in between. I could still understand most of it because the Chinese dialect used in Guangxi, Baihua, is still quite similar to Cantonese but my classmates from Sichuan and some other places could not follow her lessons. We were assessed but if we could not pass our Chinese assessment, we could still graduate.

English in secondary schooldays: I started learning English from Junior Secondary 1. But the learning during those early years was very inefficient. The teachers' standard of English was not very good. Teachers taught English in Putonghua, both in junior secondary and senior secondary school. The tools for learning were also not very advanced. We did not have tape recorders. In senior secondary school, I listened to BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] and VOA [Voice of America] a little but my listening was not systematic. There was no guidance and no book. There was also no opportunity to use it.

English at university: Only when I went to university did the teacher teach English in English. Because our university specialized in international trade, we had English lessons throughout our four-year programme, except for the last semester. A foreign teacher interviewed each of us to stream us into either the fast class or the slow one. He would ask questions like: 'What is your name?

Which province did you come from? What is your province famous for?' I could understand all his questions but, according to the Chinese way of expression, I felt I should be humble and said there was nothing special in my province and I was put in the slow class. The foreign teacher came from a special American organization, which had a contract with the Ministry of Education to send teachers here and to allow teachers to go to America for training. He taught the fast class. The slow class was taught by foreigners employed directly by the university. Sometimes, it was this person. Sometimes, it was another person. Sometimes, the teacher just taught for half a year and ran away. So it was not so good. Even though there was an English Corner for us to try to speak to each other, there was no atmosphere for us to say much. In the slow class, everyone's standard was not high. So when the teacher asked us to do discussion, the result was that I felt we were wasting a lot of time. At university, there were tapes we could listen to but the supply of electricity in Guangzhou in those days, from 1986 to 1990, was not adequate. So only when it was dark would electricity be supplied to the dormitories. So though some of us had tape recorders, we could not use them because if we had to use batteries, they would run out soon and they cost a lot of money. There was also a language laboratory; we could go there to listen to tapes but there were only forty to fifty seats but there were over a thousand students.

English at work: When I was working at the CCIB, I had to use English very often. With foreigners, I used English. There were also a lot of visitors from Hong Kong. With these Hong Kong visitors, we would speak in Chinese, often Cantonese, but fax and Telnet communication was all in English. Between 1995 to 1997, when I was working in a commercial company, I was also posted to Hong Kong for a few months periodically and would use Cantonese and English.

Learning English nowadays: I am still learning English now. I listen to VOA and CCTV9 [a national channel]. I also browse the Internet in English. For example, if I want to know about cars, I can find the information there. I think if there can be more English newspapers, use of Chinese and English on the streets, like in street names, and the government can invite more foreigners to come and interact with us, that will enhance our English.

Languages as wealth: I consider languages my wealth; the more I know, the better. My best language now is Putonghua. My second best language is the Zhuang language. After that come Cantonese, Baihua, English and Japanese (which I studied for one-and-a-half years at university) in that order. My wife is Chinese. She cannot speak the Zhuang language. My child is just one year old now. I plan to teach my child the Zhuang language, Putonghua and English. These three should be enough for him.

Shan (Northern Interior Chinese Interviewee 11, female, aged 26, a Chinese language teacher)

Background: From the time I was born in 1974 till I entered university, I was living in Huhehaote [or Hohhot], the capital of Inner Mongolia. The population was about 1 million. In 1980, I entered primary school. In 1986, I went to junior secondary school and in 1989, senior secondary school. In 1992, when I was 18, I came to Beijing for my university education. I did a double degree in biomedical engineering and scientific editing for five years. From 1997, I have been studying for my master's programme in economics part-time. I teach Chinese part-time at this university [in Beijing]. I teach the reading of newspapers and magazines in Chinese and Chinese characters for beginners.

The Shanxi dialect: Although I was born in Inner Mongolia, my parents were originally from Shanxi. So they speak the Shanxi dialect at home. Usually, they speak the Shanxi dialect and I speak Putonghua at home. But if we have a visitor from Shanxi, then I will try to speak the Shanxi dialect because the visitor will then feel that we are very close. But normally I do not speak the Shanxi dialect at home.

Putonghua: My best language is Putonghua. In primary and secondary school, my Chinese teachers used Putonghua to teach and some teachers of other subjects also used Putonghua to teach. I have a strong wish to learn dialects. I am very surprised I have this interest. I just feel China is so vast and the southern dialects are so different from the northern dialects. I am very curious about other people's dialects.

Tianjinhua: I can also speak the Tianjin dialect a little. This might be because the factory where my parents worked moved from Tianjin to Inner Mongolia. So several older workers were from Tianjin, about 30 percent of them. In China, workers in one factory often lived together in dormitories. We went to their homes to play and their children also came to our homes to play. So from the time when I was small, I listened to this type of sounds and they became familiar. I cannot speak much but I can speak it.

Dongbeihua: I can speak very good Dongbeihua [northeastern dialects] though I have never been there. I have two good friends from that region. Because Dongbeihua has a rather strong accent, I thought it rather interesting when I listened to it. So I frequently felt I wanted to learn it. Now I can communicate with my two friends in Dongbeihua and other people cannot tell which region I came from and think I am like them.

Other dialects: I have little difficulty in picking up northern dialects. At the moment, I am learning a little Shaanxihua and Shandonghua. I feel it is very simple. It is only adjusting some sounds. The phrasing and sentence structure are not very different. But for the dialects in the south across the Jiang [Chang Jiang or the Yangtze River], for example, in Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, I cannot learn anything; it is very difficult. I can guess where people are from but I am unable to learn their dialects.

Large English classes: I started learning English in Junior Secondary 1. There were sixty students in one class. Most of the time, we read aloud together after the teacher. It was like many people singing together, like a chorus. Only when we were reading did we feel it was more orderly. If you had questions, you could not stop to ask them. After the lesson, because there were sixty people, soon you would lose the interest to ask questions. There were too many people. Everyone was walking in and out and only you would be asking questions; it seemed a little stupid. In China, this is a very big problem. After we have been studying for some time, there will not be the concept of asking questions any more. No one was willing to ask questions. Even if there were really questions, I tried to control myself and did not want to ask them. When I was in senior secondary school, it was a little better. There were forty-eight people in one class. It was rather difficult to learn a second language in a big class. If we spoke, the teacher could not hear us properly.

English for examination: My reading and writing in English are good. This might also be related to the fact that in the university entrance examination in 1992 only reading and writing were assessed. For people like us coming from a small and faraway place, the only route to leave that place and have any advancement is to enter university. It seemed as if we only had one thought in our brains — to learn the answers to all the questions that might appear in the examination. If we were given a question paper, we all did it and the teacher would then check the answers with us and ask, 'For this question, what to choose? Choose "a". That's correct. Why is it correct?' I have actually been learning English for many years, thirteen years since 1986. But I only learnt and paid attention to listening and speaking English from my university days for the purpose of interacting with other people. Before that, it was only to study it as an examination subject. In many 'small places' [that is, not big cities] in the northern part of China, it is like this, probably all like this.

English outside class: At university, once the English lesson was over, I switched quickly back to Putonghua. I felt if I continued to speak English, people would judge me and would laugh at me or say that my English was not good. In the dormitory, four of us shared the front room and we had an agreement — we would speak English every night. But we only maintained this for three days because it was very painful. There were many things we could not communicate in English because we did not know the words and when other people saw us not being able to communicate, they would laugh at us and asked what we were doing. I do not know whether the English I speak is different from that spoken by other people. We only had a foreign teacher once in my third year. So when I speak with people from other countries now, sometimes I wonder if they can understand me and if what I speak is English. This is my big obstacle and is hard to overcome.

TOEFL and GRE: Most of my classmates were sitting for the TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] examination and the GRE [Graduate

Record Examination]. So I took those examinations too. If not, people would think I was very strange. There was also a school to help students prepare for these examinations. It was called a school but it was really a tutorial company. The classes were quite frightening. Eight hundred people would have the lesson together in a big hall or a warehouse. The atmosphere was stressful. Lessons were very expensive. But the company seemed to be able to get the question papers. Last year's papers — they would be able to have them this year. The TOEFL course is about five hundred *yuan*s [or Renminbi, the Chinese currency] and the GRE course is about eight hundred. The course is about ten weeks long. Every week, there are about three to four lessons, two-and-a-half hours for each lesson. Every time after a lesson, I would get a headache because there were too many people and it was too crowded. So in the end, I studied by myself instead.

Japanese: I also learnt Japanese at university for about a month but there was a time clash with something else I had to do. So I gave it up. It was also because there were too many people in the class — about forty-odd students. So it was rather tiring. We learnt from zero level but it was very repetitive. I already knew something and we had to say it over and over again. The course was free of charge. You had to pay a deposit but, if you passed the examination, it would be refunded to you. I lost my refund. It was not a requirement and you could choose to learn Japanese, French, German or even Russian. Very few people chose Russian.

Songs and television drama: I liked learning the songs in television drama too. I found these songs particularly useful for learning languages. The most popular songs in those days were those from Hong Kong and Japan. I would use my own method to write down the words even if I did not know the language. For example, if the song is in Cantonese and it is slow and the words are not fast and colloquial, if I like the song, I will try to write it down. When I was at university, I loved listening to old English songs, very nice to listen to, very famous songs. I do not like the noisy songs. The words are clearly pronounced in the old songs and the words are very meaningful. I also liked learning dialects from short plays on television.

Relating Learner Experience to Policy Implementation

The four learning biographies presented above give some indication of the variation in experience depending on the historical period the learner was educated in, the native dialect or language of the learner, whether the learner grew up in a rural or an urban area and other idiosyncratic personal or family circumstances. By and large, the younger the learner, the more mature the policy implementation, the better the learning conditions are. But there are regional and individual circumstances that give rise to differences in the experience of policy implementation even within the same time zone.

The following observations made with reference to the four learning stories are not intended to be generalizations but will focus on: the learning of Putonghua, the role of other Chinese dialects, the learning of English, the experience of minority learners and other observations on language learning in multilingual China.

Learning Putonghua

Although Putonghua has been propagated from around 1955, its spread in certain areas is incomplete; learners coming from rural or minority language areas in recent years may still face difficulty or feel a sense of inferiority about their ability to acquire an accurate or respected accent. In contrast, those growing up in coastal cities are usually in a more advantageous position by virtue of the fact that cities attract speakers from other dialect areas and Putonghua has to be the common dialect used among these speakers. Lian, the oldest of the four learners, entered Primary 1 in 1958, during the early years when Putonghua was first propagated as the national dialect from 1955. As she grew up in a city in the coastal region, it was not surprising that she was educated in Putonghua from Primary 1. Students going there from all over the province and teachers from other places could only communicate in Putonghua. In contrast, Wei, though younger, grew up in a rural area in the northern interior region; his teachers at school did not use Putonghua even in Chinese lessons; so he felt he did not learn Putonghua well until he went to university in 1988. Likewise, Bao, from the Zhuang minority, was taught in a mixture of the Zhuang language and Putonghua. Both of them cited the need to learn on their own from listening to broadcasts in Putonghua. Shan, the youngest of the four, reported that all her teachers used Putonghua to teach all subjects at all levels. Interestingly, both Bao and Shan, the younger two, reported Putonghua as their best language nowadays.

Other Chinese dialects

In spite of the spread of Putonghua, other Chinese dialects and minority languages still have a role to play, particularly in enhancing intimacy or rapport between speakers. Lian reported the use of the Wuyi dialect with her husband and her child so as to keep their conversations 'secret' or unknown to people around them. She also reported the use of several other dialects with her husband's relatives and with villagers during her research. Wei stated that his best dialect was the Tongwei dialect and indicated that his Putonghua was not so perfect. Bao considered languages as wealth and planned to teach his child the Zhuang language along with Putonghua (and English). Shan also expressed her intrinsic interest to learn several other northern Chinese

dialects, similar to her own, but felt that southern Chinese dialects were very difficult for her, perhaps because they were so different from her own.

Learning English

In the face of less than ideal circumstances for learning English such as large classes, learners tend to have to do a lot of learning on their own. Lian was convinced that she had to rely on herself to learn well because the teacher's standard was rather low; she spent a lot of time on tapes and books, though it was 'a very dead way to learn'. She was motivated by the assessment for promotion every five years. She was also pleased that she could use English in Hong Kong and in France. Likewise, Wei relied on self-study and the first book he read by himself was a poetry anthology. He felt he could handle reading but found writing very difficult. Bao also tried to learn on his own but electricity was supplied to dormitories only when it was dark; so he could not use tape recorders often. Shan's story showed that some learners took the initiative to learn from each other by agreeing to speak English among themselves every night in the dormitory. Her story also highlighted the culture of taking examinations such as the TOEFL and the GRE and the commercial courses targeted at passing these examinations. But the class size of those courses was so huge — eight hundred students in one class — that she preferred to study by herself instead. While conditions for learning English have improved in terms of technical support such as television and tape recorders, it is evident that learning English in China nowadays still suffers from insufficient opportunity to use the language for interaction.

Minority learners

Bao came from the largest minority group in China, the Zhuang people. Even so, his story still gives an idea of the additional difficulties that minority language learners may face in China. In the learning of Putonghua, he had the further difficulty of having to learn it partly through other Chinese dialects which were not his home language. Although he was taught partly in the Zhuang language and partly in Putonghua in primary school, in secondary school, he would come across vocabulary from the north and at university, his Chinese teacher used a lot of Cantonese. In spite of this, however, Bao was positive about learning Putonghua and considered learning languages to be the acquisition of wealth. His repertoire included Putonghua, the Zhuang language, Cantonese, Baihua, English and Japanese. Though he was multilingual, the very fact that Putonghua became his best language underscores the problem faced by minority learners (Lee, 2001, p. 30): competence in Putonghua facilitates their academic and economic

advancement, but that will inevitably mean lesser use of their own languages even if they may not lose them altogether. (This issue will be further explored in Chapter 4.)

Becoming multilingual in China

Much as these are accounts of what happened in the past while the learners were going through the education system, they also point to some of the circumstances in recent years because these learners seem not to have stopped their language development at the end of their education. Their stories illustrate various circumstances that can enhance learning such as parental influence (for example, Wei's interest in learning English because his father was interested), the need for interaction (for example, Bao's improvement in Putonghua at university and Lian's use of English while shopping in France), assessment for educational and career advancement (as for all four learners in learning English) and the usefulness of informal learning opportunities such as radio, movies, television and songs (as for Bao in learning Putonghua and Shan in learning different languages). Because these learners have done so much learning on their own, it comes as no surprise that they should recommend increasing radio and television broadcasts to enrich the opportunities for independent learning. What stands out most in all these stories is the self-awareness that these learners have about their learning experience and about their motivation for learning and using their various languages and dialects.

Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed briefly the overall context of developments in China, its domestic goals and foreign policy, the character of its education system and the language policies it has maintained consistently in the last half century. I have also provided a glimpse of how these policies have been experienced by learners from different time periods and with different linguistic backgrounds. Putonghua is still being propagated and English is of paramount importance as China moves comfortably into an age when international discourse is vital for its well-being. The main issues seem to be how to facilitate the learning of these two languages nationally and, at the same time, to maintain cultural coherence for the various dialect and minority language groups in the multilingual and multidialectal setting of China.

In the chapters to follow, details will be provided on the three major policies: the standardization of Chinese (Chapter 2), the ascendancy of English (Chapter 3) and language developments among minority ethnic groups

(Chapter 4). In each of these chapters, the policy steps will first be traced and the actual experiences of learners will then be presented. In the concluding chapter (Chapter 5), I shall summarize the experience of language learning in China as well as identify some trends in language education in China as a prediction of what lies ahead in the years to come.

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