

# Reflection on contemporary bilingual education in Chinese higher education with historical perspective

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**Abstract.** This paper reflects on the contemporary bilingual education in Chinese higher education, referring to the innovative bilingual teaching practices starting from the late Qing Dynasty. With the purposes of voicing for China and learning western sciences, bilingual programs were adopted in the first few original higher education institutes. These experiences leave us deliberation and speculation on the recurrent imbalance of native and foreign languages and cultures, and on future direction to research into bilingual education in universities to enhance the cultivation of internationalized talents and the internationalization of the country.

## 1 Introduction

With the advancement of internationalization in China for the past decades, universities in mainland China have intentionally introduced bilingual education in traditional and emerging disciplines [1-5]. The move aims to (1) prepare students with comprehensive understanding and repertoire of the English language in general and in specific domains and (2) boost the individual universities' talent cultivation and global recognition [1-7]. Accordingly, the role of bilingual education, its effectiveness and consequences have attracted much attention from higher education administration, and teachers and researchers from English education and disciplinary faculty.

In the beginning of this millennium, the Ministry of Education authorized the implementation of bilingual education in Chinese higher education [8]. Thereafter, the evolution of College English Curriculum offers a useful lens to understand the top-down initiative [9,10] and research reports bring theoretical inquiries, empirical studies and critical exploration related to down-to-the-earth practices [1-7, 11]. Additionally, so far in 2019, 12 China-foreign joint universities have obtained legal personality [12], and more Sino-foreign higher education programs are under construction [13]. These elite institutions and programs have seemingly enjoyed pre-eminence in their English-medium instruction (EMI) [6] as a promising route for students' future academic success. Alongside the move forward, appealing interpretations and critical argumentations have emerged to try to reveal its complexity and promote its healthy development [1-7, 11].

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## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Bilingual education / higher education in China

We use the label “bilingual education” to umbrella terms such as EMI, content-based instruction (CBI), content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and immersion, following Tong, Wang, Min and Tang’s reasoning and description [7]. Considering the complex nature of population’s linguistic background and educational practices in specific contexts in mainland China, the focal term is established in its broad sense to describe the situation that the medium of instruction is mainly a target and foreign language, English specifically, with the channels of interaction English and more or less the mother tongue or the common language in China, mandarin Chinese explicitly. The above-mentioned EMI, CBI, CLIL and immersion are approaches that have overlaps and different focuses to realize bilingual education.

It should be pointed out that bilingual education weighs simultaneously the literacy of and communication in both native and foreign languages [3-7]. It is extremely insightful for researchers to investigate contemporary contexts in relation to relevant practices in its earlier development in history [14].

Chinese higher education system could be traced back to educational innovation brought by Self-Strengthening Movement in the late Qing Dynasty. Promoters from central and regional governments urged the establishment of *Jingshi Tongwenguan* in Beijing (in Chinese, which was merged as a department into the next one), *Jingshi Daxuetang* (in Chinese) in Beijing, *Beiyang Xixue Xuetang* (in Chinese) in Tianjing, and *Nanyang Gongxue* (in Chinese) in Shanghai [15]. Without exception, these institutions, as well as *Qinghua Xuetang* (in Chinese) which was set up in Beijing in 1911, scheduled courses of Chinese as the foundation of Chinese students’ education. Meanwhile, they arranged courses of foreign languages and western sciences taught by foreign experts. In this way, these institutions nurtured many renowned interpreters and diplomats, scholars and researchers, and evolved into temporarily prestigious universities worldwide.

Today, there are over 2900 universities and colleges [12], which educate a population of more than 30,000,000 full-time undergraduates and nearly 3,000,000 enrolled postgraduates [16]. The 2018’s launch of “*China’s Education Modernization 2035*, which stresses the need to accelerate the implementation of ‘Double First-Class’ Initiative and improve the quality of higher education” [12], furtherly generates intense competition nationwide.

### 2.2 Bilingual education in Chinese higher education

A growing body of research resonates with the evolution of those top-down provisions and booming programs conducted in more and more universities [1-7]. Some results are basically favourable with demanding challenges. For example, some universities have systematically carried out relevant programs and received positive feedback from most students and faculty members, while teaching materials, teacher education and students’ language proficiency are still in serious concern [1, 2]. However, the misleading interpretations of foreign educational practices [11] and directly-borrowed western, particularly American model of bilingual education programs [5] fluctuate and even undermine students’ sociocultural identity supported by Chinese as a major medium of personal and national development [3, 5, 11]. An open attitude, then, is appealed to uncover that flexible language choices and translanguaging are valuable to reap the benefits of bilingual education [4].

While studies on the present are getting fuzzier, it is the right time to investigate this educational policy and practices with historical perspective in light of its earlier phases and subsequent evolution to enlighten its contemporary planning and practition [14].

Against serious social backwardness in the late Qing Dynasty, Self-strengthening Movement (in Chinese *Yangwu Yundong*) was triggered and innovative bilingual teaching was carried out in an effort to defend and modernize China. That innovation generated significant achievements in terms of opening the vision, updating the cognition and voicing for China, as well as questions to deliberate. For instance, the limitations mainly include the following aspects, when compared with our bilingual education in the 21th century: (1) foreign language learners aimed at *keju* (in Chinese, referring to the imperial examinations) and the position of being an official; (2) foreign language teaching was lack of procedural system and mechanism; (3) the goal of educating general talents was too ambitious [15].

In comparison, present bilingual education has strikingly similar negative factors after more than half a century's evolution [15]. Many students' main purpose of English learning is still test-oriented, such as CET-4 and 6. The test-taking training consumes their time and energy, which are supposed to be available for them to pursue academically in their disciplinary fields. More significantly, the imbalance and conflicts between native and foreign language education have prompted critiques and debates that we could not elude. Professor Li, Yuming [17] presents his concern for such linguistic environment observed on campus and in workplace, even in some academic conferences held in China where Chinese is forbidden to apply as a working language. All these measures push forward our universities' focus even more on English teaching and learning other than Chinese. He indicates that English and other foreign languages occupy Chinese learners' spiritual home, which should once be equipped with Chinese and embedded traditions and cultures.

Let us date back to the early twentieth century, as it is essential to understand the foreign language curriculum and its social consequences in *Qinghua Xuetaang* (in Chinese), which was entitled Tsing Hua Imperial College later and evolved into today's Tsinghua University, whose original purpose was to educate students for overseas study, particularly in the America. Researchers [18] introduce that all freshmen enrolled in any departments should take courses of Chinese and English for 6 credits respectively, and choose between Chinese History and Western History for 6 credits. This was seemingly the only trace that Chinese was part of the teaching plan. Most of the other periods were preserved for English education. Peculiarly, all classes offered by Chinese Section were schedule in the afternoon and were not required as credit courses. The overwhelming status of English and corresponding neglect of Chinese gradually fostered native teachers' and students' discontent and criticism, displayed by a critical incidence recast in that research. In 1921, an enrolled student blamed the university for its purpose of cultivating potential students who would study in the American, instead of educating "human". Meanwhile, he insisted that the university should centre the attention on Chinese culture and focus on developing well-rounded people. Such wording finally initiated the institutional curriculum reform, which made all stake holders face bilingual education in a more sensible way.

In today's universities applying bilingual education, native Chinese teachers and students also suffer from uncertainty and contradiction, or the loss of our "oriental essence, including Confucian educational traditions" [3]. This may bring about outcomes against the original intention [11].

### 3 Methods

This paper reflects on bilingual education in Chinese higher education in history to the present. Typical publications are representative with respect to quantitative study [1, 2], qualitative study [3-5] and review [6, 7, 11]. The paper also takes a close look at literature introducing and analysing the contexts and practition from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century [15, 18]. The history-based comparative study provides a means of unearthing recurrent patterns and interpreting related problems. The reflection attempts to

offer an alternative path to uncover similarities and differences between practices of bilingual education from different historical stages, so that some pattern may emerge to confirm existing results or to advice against repeating the past pains. Particularly, as different research approaches are presented, the critical stances embodied in individual publications may exposure to academic readership. For example, the validity and reliability of some quantitative studies have been questioned in terms of evaluation criteria and positive results directed by those criteria [11]. Yet some of the original research practically reports contradictory details in only a few words [1], which leave an expansive void for the following consideration.

## 4 Results and discussions

The paper notices a major problem with mainstream quantitative studies that they describe a rosy picture on a large canvas and seemingly feel peripheral to report some negative details [11]. For example, unfavourable feedback from students usually occurs ~~and~~ in personal communications with teachers [1] other than questionnaire answers and interviews, and not always has access to authoritative reports. Simultaneously, students are enthusiastic toward bilingual programs and satisfied with the components of targeted programs [2]. However, supportive evidence is not sufficient enough to demonstrate the accumulation of motivating factors and students' engagement in multitasks.

Meanwhile, ethnographical approach has a relatively short tradition in this field of research [3, 4]. Researchers do not take for granted those benefits which have been widely spread. Instead, they bear in mind the original intentions of such educational policies, from literacy basically to cross-cultural communication and internationalization in global stage. Their thick data gathered from long hours of observations, interviews and conversation analysis reveal both collective and individual attitudes, motivating and demotivating factors, positive and negative consequences. The results elicited from these detailed reports "coincidentally" reflect results from research on the earlier historical phases and reaffirm their authors' suggestions [15, 18].

Bilingual education in Chinese higher education should be based on the comprehensive understanding and continual study of the Chinese language, and on the recognition and development of our traditional culture as well as contemporary value systems. On the other hand, it should aim at voicing for our people and learning from other countries, instead of transforming universities and colleges into profiting channels and cultivating students as anxious social climbers with material rewards. When "harmony" could be achieved by balancing bilingual education in the higher education curriculum and teaching practice, the effectiveness may be confirmed and identities of our institutions and students may be reserved and enhanced.

While review works suggest that more scientific experiments should be adopted in further research [6, 7, 11], this paper advocates the application of qualitative study to understand a fuller picture of social, cultural, economic and emotional environment. The later approach has the potential of being critical to recognize the whole truth and to defend bilingual education against past pains in present settings.

## 5 Conclusions

Previously, researchers investigate different aspects of bilingual education from synchronic perspective, mainly beginning from the origination of bilingual education in other countries and then expending to the interpretation for its construction in our higher education. This paper hopes to put forward some insights shed by our predecessors, who were constructors

and students of the first few higher education institutions. The critique of the present preoccupation demands this wider perspective, while the evaluation of individual programs relies on proper research methods and objective interpretations.

Nevertheless, this paper has its own limitation that it should encompass more important literature to give a thicker description about the settings of different stages, so that policy-makers, educators and teachers may be well informed of the significance of balancing Chinese and English, and then modify their roles and measures and better serve students in bilingual education in Chinese higher education.

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