

# Understanding English Mania in China: Reflection and Inspiration

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**Abstract:** As the largest course of all the subjects, English education has long undertaken the most severe criticism from the society in China. The argument that English should be expelled from College Entrance Examination has been under heated discussion in recent years whenever the National People's Congress is in session. There came forth a lot of debates that the importance of English should be devalued; And to a certain extent, suspicion from the public came that whether it is still necessary to improve English proficiency on a national standard. In September 3rd. 2014, the Ministry of Education announced new plan to College Entrance Examination which is labeled by shift the emphasis from English to Chinese in test. The changes of policies concerning its status and functions in many national and provincial tests have triggered more discussion towards English teaching, learning and testing. The public wonder if these reforms will cool down the English mania and change its status and function in the future. This paper makes an exploration on the history of the English mania, probes into the internal and external forces that boosted English mania in history and compares its development with the rest of the world. Through relevant document analysis and careful reflection, the paper tries to provide an overview concerning the status, function and features of English mania in China in history and today. It is believed that neither cooling down nor heating up is advisable for a sustainable development of English language learning.

**Keywords:** English Mania, English Education, English Teaching and Learning

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## 1. Introduction

Foreign education, largely English education in China, have always been controversies in history as well as at present. Since 2001 when English has been assigned as a compulsory school course as main subject at all school from primary school to college educational level, success in English was regarded vital for achievement in almost every aspect of life – It has been highly connected with promotion in career, achievement in academy and so on so forth. While we may be surprised at how English has been given such great importance in Chinese education, we may now feel puzzled at a fact that English has seemed to be devalued recently by the Chinese state. In September 3rd. 2014, the Ministry of Education announced new plan to *College Entrance Examination* which is labeled by shift the emphasis from English to Chinese in test. Up till now, almost all major provinces have announced their new forms of innovation on College English Entrance Examination – either cutting down

the score portion to add on Chinese, or excluding English listening test from standardized entrance examination. Another issue is worth pointing that English should be expelled from College Entrance Examination has been under heated discussion in recent years each time when the National People's Congress is in session. The appeal to de-emphasize and de-value English aroused huge public concerns as to whether it was a sign the importance of English will be degraded and the obsession with English may be waning; the staggering change of the state made everyone wonder if the English mania would ever come to an end.

## 2. English Mania in Origin: Review the History

Many people hold the impression that English has no real use value for ordinary people and far from being a mania in China until the late 1970s with the boost of Open to the

Outside Policy. However, according to works on the history of English in China [1-4], the earliest English learning mania appeared soon after 1840 when Yung Wing first led young Chinese students abroad to study western science and engineering. The Qing government deeply realized language was main obstacle of diplomatic constraints after defeats in the two *Opium Wars* and subsequent unequal treaties. The western power holders even prescribed in *the Treaty of Tientsin* (1858) that the English version of a treaty should be prior to a Chinese one, obviously ordering the English language in a superior position. It was from then that the Qing government realized a great need to study the western languages with the purpose to strengthen the nation to avoid more humiliation in the future; the governors felt great need to have interpreters who must be totally “loyal” to them. This initiatively boosted educational innovation with the learning of western languages, especially English. In 1862, *Tong Wen Guan* was established. It symbolized that English education was formally carried out in government-run schools for the first time in Qing Dynasty. It was the first official establishment of English language teaching and learning in China. At the same time, there was a tremendous growth of English learning in big cities in Shanghai, Guangzhou, etc. as English was regarded as asset to get better jobs in the Customs, banks, post offices, etc. On the other aspect, British managed to establish themselves as a major power, which contributed to an outcome that English became the foreign language most favored by Chinese people. In 1889, Zeng Jize, chief official of Tongwen Guan, formally reported to the Empire that:

Among all the western languages, English and French have been used most widely and regarded as most useful, thus most students chose to learn. [5]

This can be a truly reflection of common sense held by late Qing Chinese people about the utility of the English language. It was the diplomatic necessity of training English interpreters that grabbed the government while it was economic benefits of learning English that attracted most common people. In any case, the Chinese’s effort to modernize itself triggered the English learning mania in that special historical period [6].

English remained to be the No. 1 foreign language even till the end of the Qing governance. When there was significant event like *Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895*, *Reform Movements in the year of Wuxu* (1898), English was not discouraged but undoubtedly pushed further. Later, *the Authorized School Regulation* was carried out by the government in 1903. Since then, English became major foreign language in school education and was a formal subject in Chinese middle schools. Later in 1935, the government officially stated English was a benchmark requirement for school admission as well as graduation. At the same time, one’s English proficiency would be decisive if he wanted to pursue a decent job in profitable sections of postal office, railways, banks and customs. Henceforward, the English mania rapidly spread away.

English was dominant foreign language in Chinese education system until 1966 when *the Great Cultural Revolution* broke out. The nationwide English teaching and

learning was nearly halted by the 10-year interruption from 1966 to 1976. During those ten years, English teaching and learning was officially banned. Later, Russian teaching and learning was resumed since the Soviet Union and China enjoyed good relationship. English education was resumed since the resumption of *National Matriculation Test* in 1978 in China. At the same time, the dominance of Russian came to an end in the country. From then, *National Matriculation Test* has increasingly been regarded as the key propellant for the mania of English in China as it is one of the major subjects like Chinese and math. From 1979 to 1983, English examination accounted for 10%, 30%, 50%, 70% and 100% of the total scores.

### 3. English Mania in Current China

From the beginning of the 1990s, China started to actively engage in the trend towards globalization. The entry into *the World Trade Organization* in 2001 and the successful holding of the 2008 Olympic Games all manifested China’s ambition to move towards a more central position in the world system [7]. On the economic front, it also became a more modern, prosperous nation. Since 1996, China has sustained an average of 8% GDP growth annually, achieving one of the world’s highest rates of per capita economic growth, and it has become the world’s second largest economy since 2011. In tandem with China’s economic growth, English has rapidly become the leading foreign language in Chinese education, with 400 million learners by 2010. In the 9-year compulsory education system (from elementary school to junior high school, ages 6-15), English education started in the third grade, with at least four periods of English education per week [8].

The ever increasing widespread of the English language in today’s fast-moving world which is strongly shaped by modern information and communications technology have ignited enthusiasm for the study of the language. It is an undeniable fact that English has become the global language for international communication in the fields of politics, economy, education and transportation. English has become so important for the development of a country as well as individual that a low competence in English may indicate loss of chance. It is not uncommon to find that those who can speak English well are more likely to get better jobs with better income. As is shown in a British Culture Council report *The Benefits of the English Language for Individuals and Societies: Quantitative Indicators from Cameroon, Nigeria, Rwanda, Bangladesh and Pakistan* [9], those who can speak English can gain 25% more income than those who cannot; moreover, this difference may increase to 181% in certain countries like Rwanda. Hence, major countries of the world have required that English is compulsive course in their education system. In Asia, the Japanese has already made detailed national English education plan as early as the beginning of this century with a clear aim of equip young Japanese people with a good command of English as capable Japanese culture transmitter [10]. In African country of Kenya, English is the only instructional language from grade four in primary school [11].

Even the European Union who is steady advocator of cultural and linguistic diversity has to admit that over 90% students choose English to learn as compulsive course in school for many reckon good English means more chances and better jobs.

And the situation in China is no exception: The entire Chinese society attaches high importance to the English study. Success in English sometimes would decide whether a person can get a promotion in career or pursue further study in the future. It is believed that people with a good command of English are more competitive than peers. So, it is not surprised to see that the number of English learners in China is now around 400 million, approximately one third of China's population [12]. Besides public education, English learning has also been popular in private language schools and training institutes all over the country. According to a China Daily article [13], China's training market had an estimated value of 300 billion yuan in 2010, and the English-language training market accounted for around 30 billion yuan, with the cost of one six-hour course in a Beijing language school at 300 yuan. A report gives its prediction that the total market of English training in China will be up to 1300 billion yuan in the year 2025[14].

## 4. Paradox of English Mania in China

The popularity of English, or the mania of English in China has been fueled by the development of Chinese society. However, there also has arisen some problems due to the fast and everlasting growth of English admiration.

### 4.1. Misuse and Abuse of English Tests

Though the status of English was high in Chinese society, its study was mainly examination-oriented. For example, English has been listed as indispensable for all the candidates in college and postgraduate entrance exams in China, no matter what majors the candidates are applying for. At college level, all the undergraduate students need to pass at least *the College English Band Four* if they want to graduate successfully; For postgraduates, they must study English (or another foreign language) as a required course and must be tested as qualified before graduation. What is more, although many people don't get a chance to use English in their practical work, they have to conquer the language test if they want to pass qualification assessments and get promotion on the job position. It is common and likely that people have been denied access to education or promotion only because they failed English tests. Various factors, however, are responsible for the washback effect and social impact of English tests in China. As Yang and Gui pointed out, English tests have carried an excessively heavy social weight which caused a lot of unexpected social problems, the so-called negative effect is mainly caused by this social weight and has little to do with the item types and the test content [15]. They called for the reduction of English test's social weight in public selection and evaluation; Moreover, supervision over English test's use should be enhanced by government. It is ironic that the

prosperity of English learning in China has not only failed to bring about improved English proficiency among English learners but has also put English education under fierce public criticism [16]. Since 2011, English Proficiency Survey has been conducted each year by an international education company EF (Education First) among adults from countries and regions around the globe. A harsh fact is that China has never been ranked high on this list of world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills. The survey released in 2015 showed that the scores obtained by test-takers in China were ranked among the 'low efficiency country'; With 100 countries & regions as participants, the year 2019's report shows that Chinese test-takers just ranked 40 [17].

It is undeniable fact that teaching and learning English for examination purposes has been a trait of China's English education which produces good test-takers but poor English language users. So, it is necessary to reform and make English education return to a rational level. As the most basic function of language is a tool for communication, the ultimate aim for teaching and learning English should be to equip people with competence to use the language. To best meet this demand, practical training should be highly valued which was even practiced originally in late Qing period. According to Gao, customer officers would give weekly tests on translation to students on Guan Fang Yan Guan which was established in 1865. What made the tests especially striking was that all the testing materials were weekly documents delivered to Chinese customs from American and British Embassy [18]. Those who performed well could be rewarded and were most likely to access decent jobs relating to good English language competence. This way of use – driven testing met the great demand of the late Qing government for qualified interpreters and undoubtedly would boost English language learning nationwide; To cite a fashion word for today, it means 'market' – wherever there is market from learning, there is learning for market. Meanwhile, it followed the law of learning in use and learning for use that shed positive washback effects on learning. This offers some insights on the solution of low deficiency in English learning and test-oriented education. Serious reflection needs to be made on what we should do with English tests and how we could make them reasonably.

### 4.2. Lack of Language Planning

Another criticism on English is that the mania is to blame for people's ignorance on the learning of other foreign languages. But a probe into the situation will find it indeed result from a lack of balanced language planning at the national level. Even from the early English mania period in late Qing when most students learned English out of economic rather than intellectual benefits, the government seriously supervised and regulated the learning of all foreign languages. The reasons for language planning was clearly stated in government documents as follows:

The aim of learning foreign languages is to train qualified people to meet the needs of the country. To broaden vision and enlarge knowledge, it is not recommended that the learning of English should be solely prior to other foreign languages. It is

shortsighted to focus on one foreign language only to cater for commerce reasons. To learn more technologies such as manufacture and weapon, German, French, Russian should be given equal consideration. Today's foreign language planning should go in advance to equip our country with sufficient language talents for future use. [5]

Guided by this understanding of language planning, the government would officially regulate the size of different languages' teaching and learning, thus a relative balance could be maintained at least for diplomatic communication. This view on foreign language planning is still valuable for today's education in that it offered inspiration on what government can do to ensure a balanced planning of all foreign languages and serve their purpose for the development of the country.

Even within the planning on English teaching and learning, adjustment needs to be made on what should be taught. It has been a tradition in Chinese education system that students are expected to be all-round English learners – they are required to be competent in all the five basic skills of English. However, it seems that few people can really make it; more people would take painstaking efforts on improving their shabby one. As Wen points out, requirement on English proficiency is different in different field, thus it is not rational and necessary to train students on all skills of the English language (listening, speaking, reading, writing, translating), course planning should allow learners to make choices based on individual development and social expectation [19].

### **4.3. Deficiency of Chinese Language Learning**

The argument that English education is a threat to Chinese education has been brought to public concern in China since the 1990s. The blame for failure of Chinese education was that the learning of English in schools preoccupied too much of students' time and energy. What's more, news reporting on Chinese students' unsatisfying mastery of mother tongue sparked a great deal of criticism on English mania and its priorities in China. In the years around, there have been debates about whether it is necessary for the Chinese to learn English so hard. People even proposed that English should be excluded from national matriculation examination as well as high-stake examinations. Some scholars argued that mania for English learning has wasted education resources and threatened the study of Chinese [19], others asserted that too much emphasis on English teaching and learning has resulted in a lot of people who are not able to write acceptable Chinese [20], some even say that English is not only detrimental but calamitous to the country and people. Consequently, it is not surprised that the current reform of policy on the National Matriculation Test redistributes subject scores by shifting points from English to Chinese in college entrance exams. In fact, it is absolutely wrong to attribute Chinese students' deteriorating mastery of mother tongue to their learning of English. The shift of scores from English to Chinese in college entrance examinations alone will not solve the problem of deficiency with Chinese language learning but may cause extra side-effects to the country's whole language learning context. The plans that would like to foreground the learning

of Chinese and to background English in the education and examination system are deliberate efforts made by the state to reorient itself and its language, but it cannot drag Chinese teaching and learning out of low efficiency and low effectiveness.

First and foremost, English still is the leading global language, a simple and abrupt shift of emphasis from English to Chinese in the curriculum and education may only lead to a loss of development opportunities on the world stage. The current move to de-value English alone will not make Chinese more global. As a matter of fact, the paradox between native language and English pertains not only to China, but to practically all the developing countries who need to work out and decide what is best for the nation to engage with the challenges of globalization and its aim of maintaining its own language and culture. How to combat asymmetry in the positioning of native language and English, is never a simple question.

Therefore, if it is rational for China to tackle its 'English worship' at each education stage, it is irrational to blame English for distracting much of students' attention from other subjects. What we lack of is a balanced and rational language planning, for example, by focusing on native language study in the early years and starting English study at a reasonable age, there may be the potential of providing a win-win solution for all. The learning of Chinese and English could be complementary to each other in the education curriculum. They can work together so as to foster students' intercultural competence and make the students competitive in the modern world system.

## **5. Rational Return of English Mania in China**

The English mania in late Qing Dynasty came about mainly as a result of the British power's establishing themselves as major power on the Chinese mind with a series of humiliating defeats imposed on the Qing governors. The Chinese people hoped that they could learn the languages as access to necessary western technology and use the tool of the West to compete with and surpass the West [21]. Hence the idea was explicitly reflected in a slogan: 'To learn from barbarians to check barbarians.' When China initiated its reform and opening-up policies in 1978, English education has gained steady development and began to expand. Due to the need of modernization, it became extremely necessary for the Chinese people to learn English as economic, cultural and educational advantages attached to English competence. From the 1990s, English has become popular with more Chinese people and has been advocated both inside and outside public education settings. During this period, the learning of English is characterized not as enforced spread but as active absorption in order to meet the need of internationalization and integration into the world stage. A thorough reflection on the English mania in Chinese history eventually presents that English evolved from an enforced spread to active absorption

actually is a hundred-year-history for Chinese people's pursuit of modernization and internationalization: People in Qing period started to learn English because they wanted to "know" the outside world, and the nation revived ever since; The boom of English learning in the late 1970s truly reflected that Chinese people would like to "communicate" with all the peers on the path of modernization; Nowadays both the nation and common people manifest learning English to meet challenges and seize opportunities on the road of internationalization. Therefore, the rise of English indeed complied with the nation's requirements on modernization and internationalization starting from the reviving period. This prestige is product of natural selection based on history settings and national conditions. Thus, a deliberate counter-balance of the move towards the reduction of English in the national curriculum seems a bit abrupt and irrational.

Moreover, English is considered to have qualities superior to other languages in terms of intrinsic (the nature of the language) and extrinsic (the function of the language) factors [22]. Intrinsically, the grammar and syntax of English is simple and flexible which made it possible to gain the most support for use on the world stage. Extrinsically, it is undeniable fact that English have been regarded as an indispensable tool in global competition and cooperation in many aspects of science and technology, trade, commerce and other activities. Thus, it is not uncommon for Chinese people to form a general belief that success in English is a key factor in national competitiveness and is of paramount importance to national economics in a globalized world.

English is viewed as vital for social modernization and internationalization as well as for individual advancement. Outside formal educational settings, Chinese government also encouraged a full embrace of English in various sectors such as international law, finance, mass media, the Internet, tourism, hotels, publishing, sports events, international conferences and so on. Meanwhile, the economic reform has generated a new middle class with higher living standards and a broadened international vision, thus English mania has been spontaneously ignited in civil society among students, white-collar workers and better-off families. English is regarded as essential for attaining better education, brighter career prospects and a better life. However, it is necessary for people bear in mind that a good command of English is only one factor that affect one's future. In most cases English proficiency is only one of the factors that affects social and professional status a person has [23].

The college education reform will change the landscape of English in China and in the meantime make English education return to a more rational path which conforms with the goal of English teaching and learning [15]. As Graddol puts it, "In the past, the main driver of English has been the need to pass national exams. In the future this may decline -- but the need to be able to communicate in English may increase" [24]. In this sense, the reform will benefit the learners and bring about the overall improvement of English proficiency of Chinese people. The return to a rational path of English education in China may engender some profound impacts on the status of

English, but English as an international language will retain its power in the long run.

## 6. Conclusion

The debates over English mania reflect that people have been more concerned about the effectiveness of English education rather than whether English should be learnt at all. Nowadays, Chinese people become increasingly convinced of indispensability of English for China's development. While the current move towards de-emphasis of English sparked a great deal of concern about whether the priorities of English will wane, it remains to see whether the English mania will cool down or heat up in the future. However, there was something whatsoever we could do about it. Neither cooling down nor heating up is not advisable for a sustainable development of English language learning in China. The most important is that English learning should be treated as its essence -- tool for communication. To achieve the goal, it is highly recommended that a language planning should be made at the national level to maintain consistent English teaching and learning with rational pace at different educational stages.

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