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English in China: Language, Identity, and the Ti–Yong Principle in an Era of Globalization

Dan Zhang
xxunn22@gmail.com
University of British Columbia
Colombia

Abstract: *China's relationship with English has long been shaped by history, globalization, and questions of identity. Once stigmatized as a symbol of Western aggression during the Opium Wars and unequal treaties, English later came to be justified through the ti–yong principle, Chinese learning for essence, Western learning for utility, which positioned it as a useful tool but not a cultural threat. Since the Reform and Opening-up of 1978, and especially after China's accession to the WTO in 2001 and the Beijing Olympics in 2008, English has become central to modernization, education, and international participation. Yet this expansion has also intensified debates about cultural integrity and national selfhood. This study investigates perceptions of English among high school students, university students, teachers, and parents in Beijing, employing Q methodology supported by semi-structured interviews and critical discourse analysis. Four shared viewpoints were identified: English as modernization and global mobility, cultural protectionism anchored in ti–yong, pragmatic bilingual complementarity, and anxiety over cultural dilution. Findings suggest that while the ti–yong principle remains a powerful reference point, its interpretation varies from strict hierarchical separation of cultural essence and linguistic utility to more hybrid orientations that embrace translanguaging and the legitimacy of China English. The study contributes to applied linguistics and identity research by showing how English in China simultaneously functions as global capital and a contested cultural symbol, and it argues for policies and pedagogies that enable learners to engage internationally without compromising cultural authenticity.*

Keyword: Chinese Identity, English Education, Globalization, Ti-Yong Principle, Language Policy

INTRODUCTION

The trajectory of English in China has never been simply a story of grammar mastery, vocabulary acquisition, or pronunciation. It mirrors centuries of China's interaction with the outside world, marked by historical wounds, economic revival, and the ongoing negotiation of who has the right to define modernity. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when China still imagined itself as the Middle Kingdom, a series of humiliations through the Opium Wars and the imposition of unequal treaties destabilized the local order and created deep suspicion toward English as a symbol of Western domination and aggression. In this context, English carried a symbolic burden that went beyond its communicative function: it appeared as a sign of foreign power, a vehicle of modern knowledge, and simultaneously as a threat to cultural continuity (Adamson, 2004). To respond to this unease, late Qing intellectuals articulated the principle of ti–yong, Chinese learning for essence (ti), Western learning for utility (yong), a synthesis that attempted to assert the primacy of Chinese values and heritage, while accepting Western science, technology, and language only insofar as they could serve development. From its earliest acceptance, therefore, English was framed within an instrumentalist horizon: not a marker of identity, but a practical engine of modernization subordinated to cultural essence.

The next major transformation came with the Reform and Opening-up policy of 1978, which signaled a shift in both economic and educational paradigms. As China engaged more deeply with global markets, English moved from a problematic symbolic position to a strategic competence essential for social mobility, higher education, and participation in the knowledge economy. China's accession to the World Trade

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Organization in 2001 and the hosting of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 reinforced the perception that English fluency was an indispensable credential for global visibility. English was increasingly institutionalized as a core subject across schools and universities, accompanied by the expansion of English-medium programs and an influx of foreign teachers (Graddol, 2006; Hu, 2005). Yet this rapid integration did not erase cultural anxieties. Rather than disappearing, these anxieties transformed: whereas in earlier times English was feared as an instrument of imperialism, in the age of globalization it was questioned as a medium carrying foreign values and lifestyles that might dilute Chinese-ness. Thus, the central concern facing families, schools, and policymakers was no longer whether English should be taught, but how it could be integrated without undermining the cultural essence that sustains identity.

Such questions cannot be answered solely through statistics on enrollment or curriculum policies, since their core is subjective: how individuals construct meaning about themselves, their community, and the wider world through language. Language identity theory emphasizes that language is not neutral; it is symbolic capital that ties individuals to networks of power, prestige, and belonging (Norton, 2013). From this perspective, learning English in China always involves negotiation between the global and the local, between the desire for connectivity and the obligation of cultural fidelity. Within this negotiation, the idea of China English, a localized variety shaped by Chinese linguistic and cultural patterns, has increasingly gained recognition, marking a shift from imitation of "native" norms to creative appropriation that affirms local identity (Jenkins, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2012). Yet such change has not proceeded without resistance, for globalization itself, as Arnett (2002) notes, brings opportunities for connection as strongly as it provokes identity confusion, particularly among youth exposed to English-language popular culture.

Against this historical and theoretical background, the present study explores how stakeholders in English education, high school students, university students, teachers, and parents in Beijing, perceive the role of English in modernization and cultural identity. The focus is the tension between embracing English as a form of global capital and maintaining cultural integrity as conceptualized in the ti–yong principle. Rather than simply cataloging "pro" and "con" arguments about English, the study employs Q methodology to map clusters of shared viewpoints, thereby revealing not only individual opinions but also the discourses that organize collective perspectives. In doing so, the study offers more than a descriptive account of language policy; it provides a portrait of the dialectics of identity and language within a society moving rapidly toward global centrality while still wrestling with classical questions of who they are and where they are going (Adamson, 2004; Hu, 2005; Norton, 2013).

RESEARCH METHODS

The design of this study placed subjectivity at the center of analysis. Q methodology was chosen because it combines quantitative rigor through factor analysis with qualitative depth through narrative interpretation. Epistemologically, Q methodology views opinions not as isolated variables to be aggregated, but as configurations of values and beliefs structured holistically within individuals. By sorting statements into a forced distribution ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," the method allows meaning patterns to emerge inductively from participants, rather than being imposed by the researcher's hypothesis. Consequently, Q methodology provides a productive middle ground between large-scale surveys that

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reduce opinions to numbers and ethnographic approaches that offer rich detail but resist comparison (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012; McKeown & Thomas, 2013).

Beijing was selected as the site of research because of its role as the political center, an educational hub, and a cultural stage for the nation. This setting allowed the study to capture a wide range of English language teaching practices, from secondary schools with intensive English programs to universities where English is taught both in language majors and across disciplines. High school and university students were chosen as participants because they are the primary recipients of English education through exams, curricula, and digital media. Teachers and parents were included to provide generational perspectives, encompassing both those who deliver instruction and those who shape educational aspirations at home.

In total, eighty participants were involved: twenty-five high school students in intensive English programs, twenty-five university students (including non-language majors), fifteen teachers from secondary and tertiary levels, and fifteen parents whose children were actively studying English. Recruitment was conducted through school and university networks, ensuring diversity of academic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and language learning experiences. All participants signed informed consent forms, and their data were anonymized.

The research instrument was a set of forty statements that captured the spectrum of discourses about English and identity in China. These statements were constructed through triangulation. First, they drew from academic literature on language policy, globalization, World Englishes, and identity theory (Adamson, 2004; Hu, 2005; Kachru, 1985; Graddol, 2006; Norton, 2013). Second, they reflected mainstream media discourses highlighting stories of global mobility alongside concerns about cultural erosion. Third, they incorporated policy documents and textbooks that defined English's role in the national curriculum. Fourth, they were informed by pilot interviews with educators and students in Beijing, which captured everyday expressions and metaphors from lived practice. Taken together, the Q-set represented not just a summary of literature but a montage of discourses circulating and shaping educational life.

Sorting sessions were conducted face-to-face, lasting about forty-five minutes each. Participants first divided the forty statements into rough piles of agree, neutral, and disagree, and then redistributed them into a quasi-normal forced distribution ranging from +4 (most agree) to −4 (most disagree). Following the sorting, semi-structured interviews were conducted for thirty to sixty minutes to probe why participants placed particular statements at the extremes, to elicit personal stories that reinforced their judgments, and to surface tensions felt when values conflicted with practical demands. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and translated into English for cross-data analysis.

Data analysis employed centroid factor extraction with varimax rotation. Factor retention was based on eigenvalues, significant loadings, and interpretability. Four factors were retained as they offered the best balance of parsimony and breadth. Each factor array was interpreted as a "discursive persona," representing a coherent worldview shared across participants. To enrich interpretation and avoid reducing data to numbers alone, interview transcripts were thematically analyzed through the lens of critical discourse analysis, particularly focusing on how terms such as "modern," "tradition," "global," and "authenticity" were given meaning, authority, and circulation in daily practices (Fairclough, 2003). This dual approach created a tight linkage

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between subjective positions captured numerically and the narratives that articulated their affective and ideological logic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed four discursive configurations that, while interconnected, maintained distinct characteristics. These should not be seen as rigid camps, but as horizons of value organizing what participants considered important, what they feared, and how they positioned English within the project of being Chinese in a global era.

The first configuration framed English as an anchor of modernization and global mobility. Dominated by high school and university students, this perspective expressed strong confidence that English was the ticket to top universities, scholarships, and career credentials. As one student declared, "without English, we are like closing the window to the world; Mandarin shows we are Chinese, but English shows we are modern." This succinctly captures the utilitarian ethos embedded in the ti–yong principle, in which Western learning is accepted for its practical use but subordinated to cultural essence (Adamson, 2002). For these students, modernity was not merely material advancement but also a self-image to be displayed globally. English was the medium through which they constructed a self-competent in global networks. Their emphasis on access to science and cutting-edge information placed English within the logic of the knowledge economy described by Graddol (2006). Notably, they did not perceive English as eroding identity, but rather as complementing it. Identity was safeguarded by Mandarin, history, and ethics, while English served as the engine opening wider opportunities.

The second configuration highlighted cultural protectionism rooted in ti–yong. Here, teachers and parents were most prominent, underscoring the importance of maintaining Mandarin and Chinese traditions. One teacher remarked, "we need English for science, but the teaching of literature, history, and values must always be in Chinese; that is our root." This revealed not just a functional division but a hierarchy of values, where domains involving collective memory and identity had to remain in the mother tongue, while technical knowledge could be accessed through English. The anxiety here centered on narrative control: if textbooks and English-language materials predominantly showcased Western figures and metaphors, would local traditions have enough room to remain vivid references? This concern echoed Hu's (2005) analysis of curriculum challenges, where English materials often carry cultural content with limited localization. It also resonated with Bell's (2008) argument that Neo-Confucian thought is mobilized as a philosophical foundation to reconcile modernization with cultural continuity. In this sense, the second configuration did not reject English outright, but imposed conditions: curriculum design and classroom practice had to center Chinese culture to prevent English from becoming a vehicle of cultural dilution.

The third configuration reflected pragmatic bilingual complementarity. Supported largely by university students and younger teachers, this perspective embraced Mandarin and English as complementary repertoires. They were untroubled by Chinese discourse patterns appearing in English use, viewing them instead as a mark of authenticity. As one student explained, "when we speak English, sometimes Chinese patterns appear. That is not wrong; it is our style. It is still English, but it shows who we are." This view challenged the native/non-native dichotomy and considered China English a legitimate member of the World Englishes family (Kachru, 1985; Jenkins, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2012). Legitimacy here did not mean ignoring clarity or precision, but rejecting the idea that standards were tools of cultural domination. For

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this group, translanguaging was not only a pedagogical strategy but an identity practice, enabling cognitive efficiency while symbolically affirming community belonging.

The fourth configuration captured anxiety about cultural dilution. Though smaller in number, the voices here, largely parents and conservative teachers, expressed deep concern about the erosion of cultural pride. They lamented that English-language media and entertainment displaced local classics from everyday conversations. One parent worried, "my son prefers English movies and songs. I fear he forgets our classics. English is not just a tool; it brings foreign thinking." Such sentiments echoed Arnett's (2002) concept of globalization-induced identity confusion, where exposure to global cultural flows provokes defensive nationalism. Unlike the second configuration, which sought curricular safeguards, the fourth embodied a more affective unease, not easily resolved through pedagogy alone. It required role models and public narratives that demonstrated one could be proficient in English without being uprooted from cultural heritage.

Taken together, the four configurations revealed that ti–yong remained a common framework for thinking about English and identity, but its interpretations varied. At one end, ti–yong was read harmoniously, with culture and utility cooperating. At the other, it was interpreted hierarchically, strictly separating domains of "value" and "function." In between lay hybrid practices that celebrated World Englishes and translanguaging as ways to transcend old dichotomies of local versus global. These variations should not be seen as contradictions but as natural responses to China's evolving place in the global linguistic ecology. As Graddol (2006) suggested, Asia, particularly China, may well determine the future of English worldwide. In this context, the emergence of China English is not anomalous but a logical consequence of language diffusion, which invariably produces indigenization.

The pedagogical implications are direct. If English classes continue to be viewed as "Western spaces" imported into Chinese schools, anxieties will persist. But if they are restructured as intercultural spaces, where English texts include Chinese figures, knowledge, and experiences, English becomes a double lens: broadening horizons without blurring identity. Teachers who embraced translanguaging showed that students processed complex concepts more easily when allowed to anchor meanings in the mother tongue before re-articulating them in English for international audiences. Parents' anxieties could be addressed by integrating Chinese classics with English-language reinterpretations of their contemporary relevance, thus turning continuity into a lived linguistic experience rather than a rhetorical slogan.

At the policy level, narratives of prestige require recalibration. For too long, success in English has been measured narrowly through test scores and international certifications. While important, these metrics fail to capture intercultural competence. Incorporating indicators that assess students' ability to produce essays in English on Chinese topics, local history, national scientific innovation, or cultural practices, would normalize the idea that English is a vehicle for self-expression, not just imitation. Acceptance of China English, within the bounds of clarity and coherence, should be communicated as part of the ecology of World Englishes, preventing learners from internalizing linguistic inferiority that hinders authentic expression (Kirkpatrick, 2012).

Theoretically, these findings revise our understanding of ti–yong. In its classical formulation, ti and yong were assumed to be stable: essence sealed, utility circulating. Contemporary practice shows that the boundary is porous. When students write English essays on Confucianism in the age of artificial intelligence, or when instructors

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assign case studies of Chinese innovation in English for Academic Purposes classes, utility is no longer neutral; it brings back global discourses that interrogate essence. This process need not be read as a threat but as an opportunity for enrichment. Anderson (1991) reminds us that nations are imagined communities renewed through language and media. In a world of hyperconnectivity, such renewal cannot occur in one language alone. Thus, sustaining ti while mobilizing yong today should be understood less as a rigid formula than as an ongoing curricular, pedagogical, and communicative practice.

CONCLUSION

This study began from the conviction that English in China is both a field of identity negotiation and a motor of mobility. Using Q methodology, which combines statistical factor analysis with the narrative depth of interviews, four shared perspectives emerged. The first viewed English as a driver of modernization and global mobility, compatible with preserving identity through Mandarin and Chinese values. The second reflected protectionist orientations, reading ti–yong as a hierarchy that placed cultural content under the safeguard of the mother tongue, while restricting English to technical functions. The third embraced pragmatic bilingual complementarity, legitimizing translanguaging and China English. The fourth voiced anxiety about cultural dilution, perceiving English as a carrier of foreign values that could weaken cultural pride. Read together, these perspectives show that the sustainability of ti–yong is less about closing doors and more about managing openness with careful design.

The implications are multilayered. At the policy level, English should be positioned as complementary to cultural education, not as its replacement. Curricula should systematically integrate Chinese content in English so that students become accustomed to using the global language to express local perspectives. At the pedagogical level, teacher training in translanguaging and intercultural competence will equip educators to protect student identity while enhancing achievement. At the evaluative level, success should extend beyond test scores to include authentic performance in articulating Chinese arguments, research, and narratives in clear, coherent English. These steps, if sustained, will transform English from a perceived “foreign guest” in classrooms into a “working language” that is both familiar and productive.

This research has limitations. The focus on Beijing restricts generalization to other regions with different social and economic dynamics. The sample size, while adequate for Q methodology, could be complemented by longitudinal and comparative studies to trace shifting attitudes under changing media ecologies and geopolitical contexts. Future work might also explore how concrete policies, such as textbook writing, school-level curriculum design, or assessment standards, translate ti–yong into daily classroom practice.

Returning to the initial question, can English be a bridge that widens horizons without weakening foundations? the findings suggest cautious optimism. Optimism, because students and younger teachers demonstrated pragmatic ways to combine linguistic repertoires without losing orientation. Caution, because history reminds us that languages never arrive empty-handed; they carry values, prestige, and imaginaries that, if unexamined, can distance children from their heritage. The collective task of policymakers, educators, parents, and researchers is to ensure that ti–yong does not remain a frozen slogan but evolves into a living strategy: a curriculum centering culture

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while embracing the world, a pedagogy cultivating authentic voices in a global language, and public narratives celebrating figures who naturally embody China on the international stage. In this way, English ceases to be a dazzling mirror and instead becomes a clear window, allowing the world in, while also allowing the world to see China as it sees itself.

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