Teaching Chinese as an International Language

Bilingual and bicultural scholar Yeng-Seng Goh offers the first in-depth English language analysis of global Chinese, exploring the spread of Chinese beyond China and its emergence as a global language. Approaching the topic from a Singapore perspective, Goh uses this fascinating language ecosystem, with its unique bilingual language policy, as a case study for Chinese language learning.

Offering clear insights into the pedagogy of teaching Chinese as an international language (TCIL), this book covers a range of important topics, such as the sociolinguistic profile of Chinese language student-teachers, the use of English in the teaching of Chinese, the teaching of Chinese by non-native teachers, information and communications technology in L2 learning and teaching, the progressive Chinese pronunciation programme and the progressive testing of receptive skills. In doing so, it presents a new, integrative approach to the compilation of Chinese learner's dictionaries, an innovative bilingual hybrid model for training TCIL teachers, and a solid theoretical framework for Masters of Arts programmes in TCIL and a unique perspective on the establishment of translation as a service industry.

PROFESSOR YENG-SENG GOH is a leading authority on Chinese language policy in Singapore. He has pioneered an innovative pedagogical model called the 'Bilingual Approach' to teach Chinese to the increasing number of Singaporean students hailing from English-speaking homes.

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A Singapore Perspective

Yeng-Seng Goh

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In memory of
the chief architect of Singapore's language policy
Mr Kuan-Yew Lee
1923–2015

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Preface

This book arose from my experiences in learning two of the world's major languages, namely, my first language, Chinese, and my second language, English. I was born in Singapore, home to a diverse mix of races, languages and religions, with the ethnic Chinese community constituting 74.2 per cent of the total population. Singapore has four official languages: English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, but English is the dominant language of government, education and the workplace. Since 1985, Singapore has had a bilingual education policy which mandates English as the first language for all schools in Singapore and the main medium of instruction for science and humanities subjects. It also requires the ethnic communities to study their 'mother tongue languages' in stand-alone courses – Mandarin Chinese for Chinese, *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) for Malays and Tamil for Indians. For some, the mother tongue language is in fact a second language.

Given its racial composition and unusual bilingual language policy, Singapore constitutes one of the world's most fascinating language ecosystems, with different languages occupying different niches within a city-state that forms a communication and trading hub for Asia and the whole world. I was in one of the last cohorts of Singapore Chinese students to receive an education before the 1985 bilingual policy took effect. Enrolling in Yeu Nerng School and Dunman Government Chinese Middle School, I received a predominantly Chinese-based education. English was one subject among many. Chinese is, therefore, my first language and English my second. When I eventually embarked on my career as scholar and linguist of Chinese, my early years learning English as a second (or foreign) language had a huge impact on the way I viewed and studied the teaching and learning of Chinese in Singapore (and elsewhere).

Early in my educational experience, I was fortunate enough to receive an undergraduate scholarship from Singapore's Public Service Commission. This allowed me to pursue a BA in Chinese language and literature at National Taiwan University from 1981 to 1985. In Taiwan, I found myself drawn to the academic discipline of linguistics and determined to become qualified in that field. On returning to Singapore, I worked for a number of years as a Chinese

language teacher, then left to pursue a PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London in 1992. Under the supervision of Jonathan Kaye, one of the founders of 'Government Phonology', I completed a PhD dissertation entitled 'The Segmental Phonology of Beijing Mandarin' in 1996.

My first academic position was at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore, and I have been based there ever since. In 2005, I took a six-month sabbatical as a visiting scholar at the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research at Harvard University. Ultimately, this exposure to East and West has helped to shape my academic outlook as well as provide invaluable data for my research into Chinese language pedagogy. Against this backdrop, I witnessed the inexorable rise of China and the concomitant surge in numbers of people studying Chinese throughout the world, and the pedagogical challenges that it presented.

At first, the surge of interest in Chinese caught many of us by surprise. Indeed, when I obtained a government scholarship to pursue a BA in Taiwan, many Singaporeans were highly sceptical of the future prospects for the teaching of Chinese. Back then, mainland China, under the leadership of Xiaoping Deng, had just opened its doors to the rest of the world. Nearly two decades would pass before China joined the World Trade Organization, and the rest is history; China's economy powered ahead relentlessly and today it is the world's second largest. In sharp contrast to the early days, many non-Chinese now want to study the language, and Chinese is consistently ranked as one of the most popular foreign languages taught around the world.

My own academic career has been inspired, in part, by the rise of global Chinese. In 1999 I published a paper in the *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association* – the leading English language journal in the field of Chinese language pedagogy – entitled 'Challenges of the rise of global Mandarin'. From 1999, I have been a member of the Executive Council of the International Society For Chinese Language Teaching (Beijing). In 2006, I became Head of the Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group at NIE. An important personal milestone for me was becoming a Mandarin tutor to Mr Kuan-Yew Lee, former Prime Minister of Singapore, whose experiences learning Mandarin are documented in his book, *Keeping My Mandarin Alive: Lee Kuan Yew's Language Learning Experience*.

With the implementation of the bilingual policy in Singapore, English became still more dominant. By 2011, based on a survey conducted by the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE), English was the household language of 61 per cent of the Primary One student cohort in Singapore. Over the years, my colleagues and I closely monitored the evolving sociolinguistic profile of Singapore students learning Chinese. We soon realised that there was a pressing need to develop up-to-date pedagogical models and practices that our Chinese language

teachers could adopt to teach the increasing number of students hailing from English-speaking homes. At the same time we became concerned that much of the academic literature from mainland China applied to first language learners rather than second or foreign language learners of the sort that were becoming the norm in Singapore. Hence in 2002, as academic advisor to the MOE I proposed to establish a pilot project to explore the feasibility of using English as a supplementary tool to aid students from English-speaking homes at the elementary stage of learning Chinese. Pursuant to positive feedback from students, parents, teachers, principals and other stakeholders, in 2004 MOE expanded the programme to include seven other schools.

In 2009, the NIE teamed up with a number of universities – including Osaka University (Japan), Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (South Korea), Monash University (Australia) and Vietnam National University, Hanoi (Vietnam), to form the Asia-Pacific Consortium on Teaching Chinese as an International Language, whose goals were to promote international collaboration and exchange on issues pertaining to the international teaching of Chinese.

In recognition of our growing research expertise in this field, I was further invited by The Office of Chinese Language Council International (*Hanban*) in November 2010 to deliver a key-note presentation in Beijing and to share our pedagogical approach with approximately one hundred teacher trainers, who would in turn be training three thousand overseas teachers on how to teach Chinese outside China.

As we did more research, published more papers, conducted more workshops and deepened our exchange and interaction with fellow academics and teachers – as well as other stakeholders – it became increasingly clear that there was a gap in the literature: the topic of global Chinese had only received cursory attention. A huge amount of academic literature has emerged over the years on global English and the international teaching of English, e.g. David Crystal's *English as a Global Language* and Andy Kirkpatrick's *World Englishes: Implications for International Communication and English Language Teaching*. In sharp contrast, there has been very little in-depth analysis of the topics of global Chinese and the international teaching of Chinese. Native Chinese experts who specialise in the topic generally prefer to write and publish in Chinese. What is more, they are often more concerned with the teaching of Chinese based on the underlying paradigm of a first language – which frequently amounts to the teaching of literacy rather than oral skills to foreigners for whom Chinese is a truly foreign language.

My experience in both the East and the West, my academic background in Chinese linguistics and my extensive research in the field offer me a unique opportunity to write a book in English about the rise of global Chinese and to share the experiences of teaching Chinese to learners hailing from English-speaking homes. For the international community, Singapore's experience in

recent decades teaching Chinese to a diverse student body makes it a fascinating laboratory for the testing of pedagogical techniques. As the rest of the world struggles with the problems of providing good and effective Chinese instruction for students at all ages, eager to learn a language that serves their career interests, Singapore provides an excellent case study.

The readership for this book includes both academics in the fields of language learning and bilingualism, and teachers who provide instruction in Chinese – or even English – around the world. The book also contains a number of chapters which will be of interest to policy makers in government agencies in countries where English and Chinese are taught in the school system. The book will also be of interest to graduate students and researchers concerned with language planning and related fields of applied linguistics. Finally, general readers – even if they lack proficiency in Chinese – will find much of historical and sociological interest in the range of topics covered.

The US–Chinese relationship has been described as the world's most important bilateral relationship of the twenty-first century. Likewise, I strongly believe that Chinese and English will rank as two of the most important – if not the two most important – languages in the world of tomorrow. I have written this book in the sincere hope that it will shed light on the complex dynamics underlying the rise of global Chinese and further help readers to find their own path in their journey towards mastery of Chinese, as well as English.

Yeng-Seng Goh
(*Wu Yingcheng*)
Ruoshui Xuan
'*Study by the Flowing Waters*'
Singapore

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