REVIEW

The status of Chinese English and experiences learning and using it

Zhichang Xu, *Chinese English: Names, Norms and Narratives*. London/New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. xvi+283. Hardback £145.00. ISBN: 9781138630345

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English is used increasingly widely in China by people who are becoming more and more confident in adopting and promoting their own patterns of usage. In the past, English that was coloured by Chinese features was often derided as 'Chinglish', but nowadays scholars generally accept with no such prejudice the existence and legitimacy of a distinct Chinese variety of English that is often referred to as 'Chinese English'. This book, which is intended for a general audience as well as those interested in world Englishes, aims to offer insights into the status of and attitudes towards Chinese English, and to this end, it provides a substantial discussion about ways of referring to this variety, an interesting reflection about how users of Chinese English feel about its norms, and a series of narrative accounts about the experiences of a range of its speakers.

The book has six chapters followed by a brief epilogue that reflects on the material in the preceding chapters. After the introduction in Chapter 1 that sets the scene for discussion about Chinese English, Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of research on the variety, describing the history of analysis of English in China, especially how more positive attitudes have emerged in place of the rather prescriptive error analysis that was common in the 1980s, to result in widespread acceptance of a distinct identity for Chinese English and an appreciation of the rich cultural background of its users that it incorporates.

Chapter 3 introduces a fresh framework for analysis of newly emergent varieties of English such as Chinese English. Xu says (p. 71) that he increasingly finds current models of world Englishes insufficient to describe his own attitudes and experiences in learning and using English during his life as a student and subsequently working in China, Hong Kong and Australia. He proposes a new pentagram model that combines three elements – habitus, field, and capital, from the work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu – with two elements from Chinese philosophy, *ti* (essence) and *yong* (utility), to constitute a model that offers a multi-faceted deconstruction of the identity, status and norms of Chinese English, as well as the experiences narrated by its users.

With 65 pages, Chapter 4 is the longest in the book, and more than half of these pages focus on how to refer to the variety of English that is used in China and by people from China – principally, whether it should be termed 'Chinese English' or 'China English', with the author preferring the previous term. This might seem rather a lengthy discussion on the issue of selecting a name for the variety, but the material accords well with Chinese philosophy, especially the work of Confucius, on the essential need for getting names right in order for good order to be maintained in the world. In one resect, therefore, the discussion in this chapter represents a distinctive Chinese cultural orientation in its use of English, so it offers a neat illustration of one facet of what might be called Chinese English. Furthermore, consideration of what name to use for the variety entails a valuable analysis of its status, and the discussion is always informative and interesting. In addition to discussing the most appropriate term for referring to the variety, the chapter also involves discussion of the personal names that people from China prefer to use when speaking English, principally whether they adopt English names or prefer to maintain their original Chinese names. This adds a further valuable reflection on the approaches of Chinese speakers towards western customs that they encounter when using English.

Chapter 5 deals with attitudes towards norms in English for speakers of Chinese English, including whether its users should be subject to standards that are derived elsewhere, particularly the traditional sources of English such as Britain and America. This

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is not primarily about grammatical issues such as tense and number usage, nor does the chapter deal with norms of pronunciation. Instead, in addition to some consideration of which lexical items originating in China should be considered words of English, it involves subtler socio-pragmatic issues, such as whether a request should be stated upfront and then subsequently justified (which is suggested as the usual western practice), or if instead the background reasons for the request should be presented before the request is made (which is claimed to be the usual Chinese custom). Xu also discusses whether it is appropriate to accept a compliment, or instead one should be modest and reject praise that is given, as is the usual custom in Chinese society. With data derived from a number of interviews with Chinese users of English, this chapter provides some fascinating insights into attitudes towards language practices by speakers of Chinese English. The interviews that are discussed in this chapter also reveal a further aspect that characterises the usage of these speakers of Chinese English, namely their attitude towards norms concerning words of Chinese origin. One interviewee suggested (p. 219) that *dama* (大妈, lit. 'big mother', a loud, middle-aged woman) and *tuhao* (土豪, lit. 'uncouth rich', a crude, wealthy person), words that are apparently commonly used by speakers of English in China, should now be regarded as acceptable words of Chinese English because they have been included in the Oxford English Dictionary, and one might ask if their proposed inclusion in this dictionary really means that they constitute part of English. The suggestion reflects Chinese reverence for authority, something that might possibly be regarded as one facet of Chinese English, even if in this case it is ironic that the lexicographical authority in question is external to China.

Finally, Chapter 6, with 56 pages, is the second longest in the book, and it presents the narratives of 16 different users of Chinese English about their experiences learning and using the language in China and elsewhere. These narratives are deconstructed in terms of *ti* (essence) and *yong* (utility) as well as habitus, field and capital. There occasionally seems to be some overlap in the analysis derived using these terms, particularly between *ti* and habitus; nevertheless, the pentagram framework applied to the narrated experiences teases out valuable insights about the experiences of users of Chinese English. Indeed, throughout the book, the author intersperses a micro-narrative describing his own journey in learning and using English, making this volume a rich source of data about experiences with Chinese English, offering fascinating insights into the attitudes of its users.

In summary, this book offers a thoughtful and detailed account of the experiences and attitudes of what is perhaps the largest community of users of English in the world, and it thus provides a timely reflection about the linguistic practices and beliefs of people who are likely to have an increasing impact on how the language evolves in the future. We all need to be aware that the huge range of English users around the world have massively different cultural conventions when they speak and write the language, and this book offers valuable insights into the naming conventions, the attitudes towards norms, and the lived experiences of one important community of users.

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