



Geopolitics and Language Planning

Challenges in a Post-pandemic World

Júlio Reis Jatobá^(✉)

University of Macau, Zhuhai, China
juliojatoba@um.edu.mo

Abstract. In this article, we discuss some of the main policies of the People's Republic of China that guide the teaching of foreign languages in China. The documents used in our review are laws, guidelines, national teaching standards and academic publications that relate directly and indirectly to the promotion of language policies for foreign language teaching in China. Based on the recognition of the webs of relationships between the different operational levels of language planning, we will discuss whether these relationships can guide or build a common planning for the training of language specialists and translators in a post-pandemic context. To contextualize, we will take as an example the success of the Macau Special Administrative Region in solving the challenges of foreign language teaching in tertiary institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Finally, yet importantly, we will open a debate on the actions that urge to propose a common agenda for a global language planning in a post-pandemic world with new geopolitical changes and challenges.

Keywords: Language Policy and Planning · Language Education · Geopolitics · COVID-19 · China

1 Introduction

Although China has had official language policies since the beginning of the last century¹, it is only in the early 2000s that descriptive, qualitative and critical research on China's Language Policy and Planning for foreign language teaching began to gain more prominence and space in the academic circle [1–7]. However, such research has focused almost exclusively on teaching and promoting English. In the specific case of Portuguese language, research on Language Policies and the situation of Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL) teaching in China [8–14] and the development of Portuguese-Speaking Countries-China relations are still incipient [15–19].

Therefore, it is imperative and urgent researches to fill gaps in the research literature that describe and critically analyse the environment and the context in which the policies (implicit and/or explicit) that directly influence the teaching and learning of *less*

¹ We refer here to an *explicit* and documented language policy. In China, the language interventions of the authorities date back to the *Spring and Autumn Period* (春秋时代 722–481 BC) and the unification of the country by Emperor Qin (秦始皇) around 221 BC.

commonly used foreign languages (非用外国语) in Chinese tertiary education system. Thus, this paper will discuss briefly the main policies that guides the planning of less commonly used foreign languages in China and how they can help China to affirm its preponderant role as the main agent of a new geopolitics and its role as leadership in South-South cooperation and North-South dialogue. Taking as a background the new paradigms brought by the pandemic, to contextualise our argumentation, we will, in one hand, discuss the challenges of PFL teaching (a less commonly used foreign languages in China). These will be our starting points to reflect on the challenges of language planning in a post-pandemic world with new Geopolitical paradigms.

In order to reach the goal of this paper, in the next two sections we will first present a brief review of the relationship between geopolitics and language planning in China and then use PFL teaching during the pandemic as an example to conjecture what are the new challenges for the language planning for the less commonly used foreign languages in Chinese tertiary education system in a post-pandemic world.

2 Geopolitics and Language Policy and Planning

The education policies of a nation, in general, are expressed textually in laws, guidelines or official documents. Since these policies are textually expressed, they must be taken and investigated as evidence of the concrete manifestation of a State's ideologies. However, in the case of a language policy, especially for indigenous, immigration, heritage or foreign languages, we find that, in general, there is an absence of explicit policies.

In this context, the States ideologies are not perceived in concrete manifestations, such as laws, guidelines and official documents, but as social constructs of the interaction between what is explicit and what is implicit. As Schiffman [20 p.276] points out, in addition to the elements of an explicit nature, politics as a social construct rests mainly on other conceptual elements, such as beliefs, attitudes, myths and, therefore, all the complexity intrinsic to the *linguistic culture*.

Thus, for qualitative research in Language Policy is important establishing the causal relationships between the explicit and the implicit language policy and planning. However, due to the intrinsic complexity of the *linguistic culture* pointed out by Schiffman – which, in our view, are the elements that constitute a language ideology –, we emphasize that, as Johnson [21 p.5] warns, the question of causal relationships is important, but careful research on language policies should not make causal claims about policymakers' intentions, language policies, and policy outcomes without clear evidence. Johnson concludes by pointing out that, therefore, we should not attribute, *a priori*, linguistic and educational practices to politics, as they may have arisen without these policies, or even without the support and support of existing policies.

Therefore, we believe that seeing language policies as *language ideology discourse* is one of the ways to understand states ideologies underlying language practices and language culture. However, in this article, bearing in mind the limitations for establishing the causal relationships between declared language policies and our examples, we will not delve into these relations². Thence, we will present in the next sections some of

² For a comprehensive description and analysis of causal relationships between language policies and the teaching of less commonly used foreign languages in China see Jatobá (2020).

China's language policies in a descriptive way in order to contextualize language teaching and establish the basis for our considerations about China's role in a new Geopolitics.

2.1 Teaching Foreign Languages in China Overview

Since the establishment of the Republic of China, in 1912, until the victory of the Communist Party of China and establishment of People's Republic of China, in 1949, the teaching of foreign languages in the country is characterized by a discontinuity [22]. In 1914, English was declared by the Ministry of Education as the most important language in most regions, but the political instability in which China was immersed in this period did not contribute to the development of consistent and effective policies for the teaching of English or other foreign languages. Although our interest in this paper is the modern China, it is relevant to note that the teaching of foreign languages in China – in this case, English – has its roots in the period between the mid-1800s and 1911 (end of the Qing Dynasty). In this period, as Lin [23 p.256] reports, the treatment given by the empire to foreign languages was based on the principle that, under state sponsorship and under its strict supervision, languages should be learned divorced from any cultural and ideological implications.

At this time, the status of foreign language teaching was associated with the utilitarianism of English teaching, under the government guidelines of the “Chinese knowledge as the foundation and Western knowledge for utility” [23 p.256]. The late Qing Dynasty was marked by more institutionalized diplomatic relations between China and the West, because with the events of the nineteenth century and to integrate and adapt to the new world order, China was forced to revise your own Sino-centric, geographical self-centredness and civilizational self-centredness views [24 p.412], whose policy for foreign affairs was an indicative of a change in the traditional ideas and values of the Qing Dynasty and gave a great impetus for the revision of the xenophobic policy of the dynasty [24 p.427].

Although in the Qing Dynasty there was already a government position for language teaching, it was only after the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 that specific policies for foreign languages and languages had to be more explicit to align with the proposal of the new Chinese government. In the early 1950s, concerning the ideology proposed by the revolution, teaching Russian became a major player in Chinese education, becoming the most important foreign language.

However, while the Chinese government were dissatisfied with Russia's treatment, English once again occupied a prominent place in foreign language teaching and grew in strategic importance [25–27], because “the dream of finding an ally in the Soviet Union was soon shattered because the Soviet Union did not treat China as an equal and did not provide the aid in the manner as promised” [28 p.115].

Thus, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, China began to think of teaching English as a possibility to participate more actively in the world scene and to promote internal development. However, when China appeared to be ready to establish new ties with the West, the events unleashed in the second half of the 1960s culminated in the Cultural Revolution, a pitiful period to learn foreign languages in modern China.

However, in the second half of the Revolution, between 1971 and 1972, with the new guidelines taken by the Chinese Communist Party committee, the situation of foreign

language teaching began to emerge from chaos [27 p.324], being some foreign language institutes reopened and authorized to open new classes and enrol new students. However, the years of retreat in the teaching of foreign languages in China only ended in 1976, a year marked by the death of Mao Zedong and the end of the Revolution.

With this milestone, the period of China's Reform and Opening-up Policy (改革开放) began, which gave language teaching new impetus. With the return of the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (see [29]) in 1977, most universities effectively resumed their activities in 1978 and, in the meantime, Deng Xiaoping announced the four bases for the modernization of China³ (Agriculture, Industry, National Defense and Science and Technology).

Ross [22] argues that the teaching of foreign languages in modern China has been marked by discontinuity, but what we perceive through the historical events of the last century is that since the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949) there has been a growing effort to the implementation of foreign language teaching in China. Thus, we can divide the teaching of foreign languages into modern China in three major periods (*before, during and after* the Cultural Revolution) and, despite the specificities concerning each of these periods, we note that was only during the Revolution there no development and promotion of foreign languages in China was explicit.

In addition to taking into account the history of foreign language teaching in China, it is important to note the internal linguistic environment of China, as Lam [26 p.18] points out:

At the individual level, the language experience of learners in China is certainly not linguistically discrete; each learner tends to be exposed to more than one language or more than one dialect. Hence, a multilingual approach is quite essential for an appreciation of the realities of language education in China.

Thus, it is necessary for teachers and researchers to consider the linguistic repertoires of Chinese learners, and for studies in language policy to assume that multilingualism in China is an inseparable reality in the classroom, whether in Chinese language classes or in foreign language classes.

Having made these brief considerations about the history of teaching foreign languages, we proceed to present more specifically for the relations between the modern Chinese foreign policy and foreign language teaching.

2.2 Chinese Foreign Policy and Foreign Language Teaching

As of 2001, with the entry into the WTO, China, through its foreign policy, began to give even more importance and prominence to the teaching of foreign languages [2, 4]. Until then, the Chinese government paid special attention to the teaching of English as one of the main subjects in secondary education, alongside mathematics and the national language. The emphasis given to English in Chinese policies for foreign language education was, according to Lin [23 p.260], perceived by the population with an absence of ideological resistance, corroborated by the popular perception that the emphasis given to the teaching of English was beneficial and advantageous, both individually and nationally.

³ Announcement made on the occasion of the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1978 (中共十一届三中全会).

However, in the mid-2010s, the Chinese government has shown that it has reconsidered its policies for teaching foreign languages and has signalled, through its recent decisions and actions, the progressive decrease in the emphasis given to English in higher education entrance exams (see [30]). However, this does not mean the weakening of the status of the English language in China, on the contrary, English continues to be one of the instruments adopted to promote the internationalization and globalization of the country, and, in the eyes of the Chinese government, the supremacy of English is unquestionable. As a global and international language [23 p.260]. We emphasize that, with the exception of the works of Hu [4, 5] and Feng [1], there are still not many studies or references about this apparent change in language policy in relation to English, but in relation to what these actions suggest, according to the Hu and Feng, the government's interest indicates actions to improve the English language proficiency assessment system.

Regarding the interest of Chinese foreign policy in other foreign languages, we highlight, among several reasons, the Chinese interest in internationalizing its public and private companies. However, in addition to this commercial interest, there is also a political interest from China regarding the expansion of diplomatic influence through its *Soft Power*. The interest in exercising political influence is not recent and dates back to the Cold War, a period in which China was already politically attracted to Africa. This interest is part of China's international positioning strategy, giving Africa and other developing countries support and support, acting internationally as "the protector of the common interests of developing countries and the agent of a new international economic order hopefully fairer" [31 p. 193].

Regarding the Portuguese-speaking countries, Alves and Saldanha [31] observe that China's interests are not restricted to Brazil, one of its biggest trading partners and the country with the largest number of Portuguese speakers, or to Portugal, a gateway to the Union. European Union, and consider that:

What does matter are, indeed, the African Portuguese speaking countries and East Timor, because despite their small population and broken economies, they do represent a large pool of under explored natural resources that goes from fisheries, agriculture, forestry and tourism to natural gas, coal, mining and oil. [31 p.191].

As we can see, the interest in the African Portuguese-speaking countries is not merely political-ideological; rather, it is an explicit economic interest, notable for the increase in commercial exchanges and the search for suppliers of raw materials. For these purposes, China has made use of its historical relations with Portugal and has made Macau the ideal environment to achieve its goals.

The choice of Macau to host the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (Fórum Macau), created in 2003, whose meetings are held every three years, is therefore highly relevant. Furthermore, with the return of Macau's sovereignty to China (1999), the Chinese Central Government took the initiative to enhance Macau's Portuguese identity, to create and develop ties with the Portuguese-speaking countries and, thus, promote the region as a special and to catalyse cooperation and investment between Portuguese-speaking countries and China [31].

The emphasis given to the region as a platform between China and Portuguese-speaking countries has also reflected in the promotion of this language, since Macau is an effective member and supporter of the Union of Portuguese-Speaking Capital Cities

(UCCLA), participates in the Association of Portuguese Language Universities (AULP), houses the Pedagogical and Scientific Center of the Portuguese Language (CPCLP) and, in 2003, requested observer status from the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP). This last fact is extremely remarkable if we consider that, during the Portuguese administration, despite many efforts, China never allowed Macau to be a member of the CPLP [31 p.190].

Serving the purpose of China's globalization and internationalization, the Chinese Central Government has endeavored to – in addition to encouraging the teaching of primary, secondary and tertiary English – foster the university teaching of other foreign languages. As we have seen in the previous subsections, the vertiginous growth of higher education institutions that offer degrees or courses in Portuguese is remarkable, a phenomenon that occurred just after China's entry into the World Trade Organization (2001); the official launch, in 2002, of the Chinese internationalization policy, referred to as *Going Global Strategy* or *Go Out Policy* (走出去战略); and the implementation of the policy of *bringing-in strategy* (引进来). Subsequent to these internationalization policies is the recent and growing demand for professionals, specialists and translators in less common languages, a direct result of the largest global initiative ever launched by China, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [32, 33].

This search for specialists and translators in less common languages can be seen in terms published in policies, action plans and guidelines of the Central Government of China, such as *language talent* (语言人才), *language talent training* (语言人才培养), *Language Talent Training* (语言人才培养), and *Foreign Language Talent Training* (外语人才培养) (see [34]).

From the perspective of the emergence of language planning for BRI and talent training policies, Zhao [35] argues that linguistic support must be guaranteed for the construction of the BRI, since, according to Zhao, in this way, the basic integration between language and culture will be the foundation that will bring the population closer to the construction of the “Belt and Road”. Within the emerging needs, Zhao points out the need for “training language talents” and creating language products and services, such as. Zhang [33], in an investigation of current policies for linguistic advancement and the projections for the realization of the BRI, verifies seven linguistic demands that must have their studies in depth for the creation of policies and action plans. More efficient, namely: (i) accelerating the modernization and protection of language resources in Central and West China; (ii) languages of cross-border ethnic groups and peripheral security; (iii) “Belt and Road” and China's policy on foreign language teaching; (iv) Chinese internal communication and “Belt and Road”; (v) Chinese language teaching and “Belt and Road”; (vi) the “Belt and Road” discursive system; and (vii) the development of a “linguistic think tank” and its future work.

Therefore, it is important to note that among the countries included in the BRI there are more “less common languages” than “common” and, therefore, it is to be expected that the government will create an environment of encouragement for universities to open courses in the “less common languages”. “, in a rational and orderly manner, in order to create mechanisms to strengthen understanding and collaboration, especially with countries in East Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa [36 p.3].

As the aforementioned authors argue, Zhang and Liu [37] argue that the BRI is a strategic plan for global governance and, consequently, cannot be carried out without effective short, medium and long-term language policies. However, for the authors, language planning for the “Belt and Road” should not be restricted to national demands only, but contribute within a global logic to the co-elaboration of language policies with representatives from different sectors of the public sphere and with different theoretical and conceptual assumptions that produce more efficient and more realistic central policies [37 p.95]. As the authors state, this new challenge brings the need of think language policy and planning as “Governance of linguistic life”, where, under the governance concept, language planning could examine the ways in which language and people’s linguistic behavior are interfered with by multi-thematic, non-binding and informal perspectives. In this respect, the practical significance of proposing “governance of linguistic life” is to improve the effectiveness of language planning activities [37 p.98].

In this sense, the authors state that “Governance of linguistic life” can be understood as linguistic planning based on the theory of governance, which must include the central features of the theory of governance and the fundamental task of linguistic planning, specifically: the diversity of participants in order to solve (or in order to solve them more efficiently) the various problems encountered in linguistic life, through cooperation and continuous interaction, the various written and unwritten, formal and informal, mandatory and non-mandatory systems, agreements, etc.” [37 p.98, in my own translation].

Despite their possible applicability in studies of Language Policy, the concepts of “linguistic governance” and “governance of linguistic life” have not yet been explored in depth in longitudinal or even descriptive studies. However, this proposition of applying the theory of governance to linguistic planning illustrates very well how linguistic issues occupy a primordial place for the success of the initial phase of the realization of the “Belt and Road” and, subsequently, an important core for the discussion of the role of China as the main author of a new geopolitics.

3 Pandemic and Foreign Language Teaching

Taking the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR) online teaching of PFL response during the COVID-19 outbreak, in this section I raise brief considerations from the imposition of a new paradigm of teaching PFL in China. These brief considerations will be the starting point for discussing whether language teaching during the pandemic can point out directions for us to anticipate lines of work to deal with new paradigms for the language policy and planning in a post-pandemic world.

At the beginning of 2020, in the MSAR PFL teaching was already facing the challenges arising from the imposition of a new teaching paradigm forced by the still unpredictable developments of COVID-19. MSAR registered its first case of COVID-19 infection on January 22, 2020, when the vast majority of university students used the Chinese New Year academic recess to return to their homelands [38 p.49] or to travel abroad. Also during the Chinese New Year recess, the MSAR, one of the most populous regions in the world, all public and private educational establishments in Macau have postponed or cancelled the return to classes.

Despite the climate of uncertainty, in order to minimize the effects of postponing classes for university students, in the second week of February 2020, online teaching began in the MSAR [38] and on February 24, 2020, online teaching started in Mainland China [39–41]. In this context, the MSAR and Mainland China implemented online education for their higher education institutions even before the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic [41 p.538].

With an increasing and constant rate of digitalization of Chinese society and use of the internet since the first decade of this century [42], the use of digital resources and technologies for language teaching in China is nothing new for teachers and learners. In this sense, COVID-19 did not represent in itself the imposition of a “brand new” teaching model, but a catalyst to make teaching planning and educational policies more flexible in order to insert the “digitalization of teaching” and the “digitalization of administrative bureaucracies” in an emergency context.

In this regard, China’s initial directives for online teaching in times of COVID-19 announced on February 5, 2020 were not designed to impose or standardize methodological and/or pedagogical issues of online teaching, but rather to resolve questions about administrative bureaucracies, such as recognition of class hours, course evaluation and accreditation of online classes [43].

Regarding the teaching of foreign languages, despite the fact that PFL e-learning in China is a reality [44], it is important to highlight that, compared to the teaching of English, there is still a lack of specific technologies for the teaching of less commonly foreign languages in China and, consequently, the literature on the use of technologies and e-learning in the teaching of PFL in China is a critical area.

Even considering articles and works written in Chinese and published in China, research on the use of e-learning in teaching foreign languages during the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak is still incipient [44–47]. Therefore, as pointed out by Zhou and Pei [47 p.70], there is an urgent need for studies on the autonomy and independence of foreign language learners in the use of learning and e-learning technologies, especially in emergency contexts. In addition, we consider that this urge for studies on the autonomy and independence of foreign language learners should also be extended to the training of language learning software developers.

Having made these brief considerations, in the next section we will present our discussion on how language planning for teaching foreign languages can play in a post-pandemic world.

4 Discussion

The world, especially the countries of the political West, watched in disbelief and inert the first developments of COVID-19, thinking that this would be a reality restricted to China. Prejudice and phobia against the Orient and Orientals – this Orient that, as Edward Said [48] would say, is a Western invention – was this time personified by the “Chinese virus” and brought dangerously into politicization. At this pace, the reflection on foreign language teaching during the first times of pandemic outbreak and, hence, the possibility of other nations taking advantage of China’s remote teaching experiences came, unfortunately, late.

From the point of view of educational macro planning, there were conditions for governments and educational institutions to prepare more effectively, but not all of them did so or, except in some cases, had the possibility and competence to do so. Consequently, as usual, the responsibility fell to the most exposed and most vulnerable actors in the education system: learners and teachers.

It is undeniable that the teaching of foreign languages has idiosyncrasies that make remote teaching even more difficult and that make the use of methodologies for teaching through technologies a critical area. In addition, remote language teaching technology in *covidian times* was not configured as just an additional resource, but became the main one.

Living the MSAR and China in an era of advanced use of online technologies and high rate of digitalisation of the everyday life, accessibility to language learning technologies was not a big concern in the Chinese context. However, applying this reality to a global context, one of the main questions to language policy makers is how to provide accessibility conditions to these resources and, consequently, be fairer in the distribution of technological resources worldwide?

After the first years since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, it is imperative to reflect on whether the role of online technologies in foreign language teaching has been only a palliative or is already a permanent reality. In this sense, these questions should be more assertively inserted into language planning and materialized in specific public policies that, in addition to promoting the development of accessible language teaching technologies, establish a collective agenda for digital inclusion.

More important, the urgency in the use of technologies in the language classroom, together with the limitations for the international movement of people, highlighted the need to accelerate an already inevitable reality in globalized economies: in one hand, the use of technologies to reduce geographical distances and to increase the efficiency of foreign language teaching, and, on the other hand, the need to discuss common agendas for international cooperation on language planning and political mechanisms to ensure the accessibility of technologies for education.

Having made these considerations, what can we reflect on the relationship between geopolitics and language planning in a post-pandemic world, taking the teaching of less commonly foreign language in China as an example? To understand these relations, it is important to understand the crucial role of foreign language teaching in modern China and, therefore, to understand language planning within the perspective of Governance theory. Despite the complexity of this topic, two considerations for understanding this relationship are worth mentioning.

First, taking into consideration that the Chinese logic of investing in multipolar transnational blocs are based, above all, on an interest in increasing trade and expanding consumer markets, despite the cooling of the global economy due to COVID-19, in the coming years the less commonly used foreign languages teaching in China will continue to play a key role in the growth of the Chinese economy.

Second, despite the strengthening of its diplomatic rhetoric, on the contrary to what some Western leaders claim, we must emphasize that China's foreign policy actions to consolidate itself as a regional and global leadership is based on a peaceful and harmonious global growth in a perspective of development based on win-win cooperation

and mutual understanding and respect of nations [10 p.75]. In this sense, as we discussed earlier, from the perspective of the emergence of language training for BRI and talent training policies, increasing the number of professionals specialized in less commonly used foreign languages is fundamental to China maintaining its leadership and its role in new geopolitics.

In conclusion, despite all the adversities arising from the pandemic, in a post-pandemic world with geopolitical changes and challenges, language planning and language policies – whether supra macro, macro, micro, or infra micro levels – cannot be thought of without integrating the local with global demands.

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