Conference interpreting in China

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Introduction
Conference interpreting in mainland China has broadly developed in two stages: a ‘professional’ period from 1979 to the mid-2000s, prioritising quality over quantity, followed by a rapid ‘industrial’ expansion to meet broader demand but with much looser quality control.

The UN Training Programme for Interpreters and Translators in Beijing (UNTPIT) (1979–1993)

The modern profession of conference interpreting was introduced into mainland China with the establishment of the United Nations Training Programme for Interpreters and Translators in Beijing (UNTPIT) in 1979. A joint initiative set up by the United Nations and the Chinese government, it sought to meet the pressing need for Chinese translators and interpreters in the UN following the approval of Chinese as a working language of the General Assembly and the Security Council in 1973 (Baigorri-Jalón 2004: 125). Modelled on an earlier project with the Soviet authorities to train UN Russian-booth interpreters in Moscow (see Matyushin & Buzadzhi, Chapter 11 in this volume), the programme was funded by the United Nations and hosted by the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages (BIFL).

The top priority for both sides was quality. As the prospective employer of graduates, the UN emphasised during the negotiation process that “quality, rather than quantity … [would be] … essential to the survival of the Program[me]” (Yao 2019: 450), and that it would be judged a success if one cohort could produce just two graduates who could qualify as UN interpreters. For the Chinese side, delivering high quality would also be crucial for justifying to the UN the choice of Beijing as the training venue rather than New York; moreover, the project took on political significance, being seen as “an important step for China’s overall opening-up policy” (Yao 2019: 450).

Trainees were chosen from the teaching staff at BIFL’s English Department and given internships at the United Nations as a crash course in simultaneous interpreting. The UN would send examiners for entrance and final examinations, and dispatch staff interpreters to teach on an ad hoc basis. Trainees were recruited through competitive national exams, with 536 applicants in the first year, of whom 25 were admitted (later to be streamed into translation or...
simultaneous interpreting) (Yao 2019: 457). Most recruits were graduates of top universities in the country and were attracted by the unique opportunity to work at the UN at a time when there were limited chances to study or work abroad.

After the first couple of years of trial and adjustment, the programme stabilised into a two-year structure with a common curriculum in the first year of translation and consecutive interpreting, forking out in the second year into two separate tracks, one for translators and one for simultaneous interpreters. In terms of content, the course was exclusively geared towards preparing trainees for service at the United Nations, drawing on authentic UN texts and recordings for all training exercises, supplemented by courses in UN affairs, international affairs, and economics. The vast majority of students trained in a Chinese/English bi-active combination, with Chinese as their A language. (A French section that ran for a few years also produced a handful of interpreters in the Chinese/French combination.)

In its SI pedagogy, the UNTPIT featured a strong focus on sight translation exercises, developed by its founding director Zhang Zailiang, to reinforce SI training and in particular the technique of segmentation and linear rendering, seen as vital for overcoming word-order differences between English and Chinese, especially for English-Chinese simultaneous interpreting of dense written input as is commonly encountered in the United Nations (Dawrant 1996: 39–60). This pedagogical approach is well presented in a textbook written by a graduate (Zhang 2011).

The training facility was fashioned after a language laboratory, with boxes of audiocassettes of UN conference recordings regularly flown in from UN headquarters. On their own time, students practised with a Sony dual-track portable tape recorder and were encouraged to accumulate many hundreds of ‘tape-hours’. The programme was also equipped with the first mock conference room in China, with eight booths.

True to its commitment to prioritise quality over quantity, from 1979 through 1993 when the UNTPIT was shut down, it graduated just 108 interpreters (103 in the Chinese/English combination, and five in Chinese/French), an average of just nine per cohort (BFSU 2019). Like the interpreters trained at the UN school in Moscow, graduates did not become permanent UN staff but were ‘seconded’ to the UN from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a period determined by their national authorities (Baigorri-Jalón 2004: 99–100). This created a rotation system whereby graduates would work for a few years in the UN and then return to China, to be replaced by new graduates. This system was intentionally designed to build capacity in the Chinese government, not just for interpreting but more generally for multilateral diplomacy. It also benefited the programme as some returnees were assigned to be trainers.

The rotation system came to an end in 1990 after UN Chinese language professionals successfully petitioned to become permanent UN staff. With all UN interpreter positions filled and a backlog of graduates on the roster pending assignment to a duty station, the programme was shut down in 1993. Only in 2005, in light of projected vacancies due to retirements, did the United Nations organise for the first time an open Language Competitive Examination (LCE) for Chinese Language Interpreters. Up until 2008, all Chinese interpreter positions at New York and Geneva were filled by UNTPIT graduates.

The UNTPIT’s historical significance goes beyond ‘just’ training China’s first generation of professional conference interpreters. It has been “acknowledged as creat[ing] many firsts in the history of Chinese education and public diplomacy” (Yao 2019: 461). Some graduates later went on to prominent official positions, including as China’s ambassadors to the US and the UN. The programme was also the alma mater of several of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ principal interpreters at the side of China’s state leaders through to the 2010s, and a large majority of China’s earliest AIIC members.
The success of the UNTPIT is attributable to a high-level commitment of resources and strict quality control standards, overseen by demanding official stakeholders.

**EU–China Interpreter Training Project (EUCITP) (1985–present)**

Since 1985, the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Interpretation (SCIC) has offered a half-year introductory conference interpreting course in Brussels for selected trainees from China. This EU-China Interpreter Training Project (EUCITP) is the “longest-standing cooperation venture between the EU and China” (European Commission 2021) in any field.

Through a selection process administered by the Ministry of Commerce, 8–10 trainees are admitted to each course cycle. Application is open to civil servants from government ministries as well as staff from other public institutions and state-owned enterprises. Each cycle, applications may also be accepted from a different province or municipality on a rotating basis. In most years, two cycles have been offered, one for Chinese/English, one for interpreters working between Chinese and a different European language, such as French, German, or Spanish. Training in all cases is in an A/B bi-active combination. To date, a total of over 500 trainees have completed the programme.

The course is taught by EU staff interpreters, who do not have Chinese as a working language, with the assistance of a visiting scholar from China who co-teaches for the last three months. Trainees are generally a mix of interpreters with both formal training and experience, recent graduates of interpreting programmes with limited experience, and uninitiated novices. Recent cycles have featured 21 weeks of skills training, spanning four weeks of retelling without notes, eight weeks of consecutive, and nine weeks of simultaneous. Semi-extemporaneous ‘trainer speeches’ delivered live by interpreters or trainees are used for all exercises, not authentic conference recordings. Training does not extend into advanced text-based simultaneous interpreting and more difficult input conditions. Apart from learning interpreting skills, trainees also take classes in EU affairs and visit EU institutions.

The EUCITP has been influential in building awareness and capacity in participating institutions. Some alumni have taken part in critical negotiations concerning China’s economic integration with the world, as interpreters and even as negotiators for China’s WTO accession and in recent trade talks between China and the US. The project has also helped fill the training gap for interpreters working between Chinese and European languages other than English.

**Best-practice postgraduate professional diploma programmes**

Following the closure of the UN school in 1993, there are presently three centres on the Chinese mainland—one in Beijing, one in Shanghai, and one in Guangzhou—that offer two-year full-time postgraduate training in conference interpreting in line with the international ‘best practice’ model. All three were established in the early to mid-2000s and are two-year postgraduate diploma, not degree, programmes, training conference interpreters in a Chinese/English bi-active combination.

**UIBE-SITC**

Building on the success of the introductory course in Brussels, from 2001 to the present, DG-SCIC has further partnered with the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE) in Beijing on a full diploma course at UIBE’s Sino-EU Interpreter Training Centre
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(SITC). Classes are taught by local instructors all trained by SCIC in Brussels, with SCIC trainers providing pedagogical assistance and sitting on exam juries.

**SISU-PDCI**

In 2003, Shanghai International Studies University (SISU, known in Chinese as ‘Shang Wai’) established a two-year full-time postgraduate programme leading to a Professional Diploma in Conference Interpreting (‘SISU-PDCI’). The programme was explicitly modelled on AIIC’s Best Practices for Conference Interpreting Training Programmes (AIIC 2021a), and in its early years established a reputation for being “very rigorous” (Bao 2015: 406). The programme enjoys official cooperation with both the United Nations and the EU, and both organisations have routinely been represented on its exam juries.

**GDUFS-CIP**

Since 2005, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDUFS, known in Chinese as ‘Guang Wai’) has run a Conference Interpreting Programme (CIP), which in 2013 was brought into alignment with international best practices with the introduction of final qualification examinations with external examiners. GDUFS is an influential centre of publishing activity in Interpreting Studies in China: a recent scientometric study found that GDUFS authors have received more than twice as many citations as the number two-ranked institution (SISU) (Xu 2017: 28). GDUFS was also a major driving force behind the establishment of the Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) degree (see below) and houses the MTI secretariat.

**Discussion**

Common features of these three programmes include: selective intake of around 10–12 students each year; an intensive skills-based curriculum taught by experienced professional conference interpreters; an intermediate qualifying exam at the end of the first year; advanced training in simultaneous in the second year and a short practice visit to an international organisation; and professional qualification exams with external examiners at the end of the course, leading to a professional diploma in conference interpreting.

A common challenge is the general lack of English-A instructors who are qualified to teach Chinese-English conference interpreting (and indeed of English-A students).

In sum, the conference interpreting programmes at UIBE, SISU, and GDUFS can be seen as resolute attempts to implement in China the internationally accepted ‘best practice’ model for conference interpreter training, as set out in AIIC’s Best Practice Guidelines for Conference Interpreting Training Programmes (AIIC 2021a). Endorsed by 30 chief interpreters of national and international organisations in their Declaration on the Training of Conference Interpreters, this training model is “governed exclusively by principles of quality and not of quantity” (HINTS 2012), and, crucially, requires students to pass a performance test before a panel of external examiners, demonstrating professional competence in both consecutive and simultaneous modes as a precondition of graduation (Setton & Dawrant 2016: 375–384).

If internationally there is “broad consensus on [these] basic standards of training” (Diriker 2015: 181) and on the desirability of final qualification testing in particular, this is certainly not the case in China, where only these three programmes out of several hundred nationwide currently adopt this model.
Master’s degree programmes: enlargement and expansion

As China’s spectacular re-engagement with the world unfolded through the 2000s, symbolised by its WTO accession in 2001 and hosting of the Olympic Games in 2008, increased demand for translators and interpreters led to the rapid expansion of T&I training on an entirely different ‘local’ model, in master’s programmes with much larger student intake and without final qualification testing.

BFSU

The pioneer of this model was the UNTPIT’s former host institution, renamed Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU), which established China’s first Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation (GSTI) in 1994 and relaunched conference interpreting as an MA programme (without UN involvement).

Final qualification exams were cancelled from 1996 onwards, with graduation instead being linked to completion of an MA thesis. Then, in 2001 the intermediate streaming of students into conference interpreting and translation sections ended. The translation section was henceforth closed down permanently: all students admitted to GSTI from 2001 onwards have automatically entered and graduated from the conference interpreting programme (Li 2018). This radical reform was driven by “student preference” (Li 2018), as in China, conference interpreting is much better paid than translation.

Under this new model, enrolment in GSTI’s conference interpreting programme was rapidly expanded from fewer than 10 to over 100 students per year, with virtually no attrition. By 2018, a total of over 1400 students had graduated (Li 2018). Currently, GSTI graduates 110 students on average each year (with a record high of 130 so far), making it probably one of the world’s largest conference interpreting programmes (Li Changshuan, pers. comm.).

This model, selecting trainees through entrance exams, but without intermediate streaming or final qualification testing, instead linking graduation to a thesis requirement, has become the mainstream ‘Chinese model’ for interpreter education: yanjin kuanchu [selective admission, lax graduation standards]. It is this model that has informed the design of the MTI degree.

MTI

In 2007, the Ministry of Education approved the establishment of a new two-year postgraduate professional degree, the Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI), that aims to train professional translators and interpreters. This unleashed “an enormous endeavour to start hundreds of new programmes from scratch and build up a discipline in translation and interpretation (T&I) education” across the country (Bao 2015: 415).

Within the MTI framework, two majors may be offered: translation and interpreting. Training is bidirectional between Chinese and one foreign language, overwhelmingly English. In principle, schools offering the interpreting major are free to “choose to train conference interpreters, or interpreters for non-conference settings … depending on the institution’s strengths” (Bao 2015: 403). Despite this, both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting are compulsory courses in all MTI interpreting programmes. At the time of writing, there are 259 MTI programmes across the country (CNMTI 2020).

Obviously, there could not possibly be enough qualified interpreter trainers to train new interpreters at this scale, in any country. Instructors have therefore been drawn from among
existing university language faculty and are not required to have any formal training or certification in interpreting. To help these instructors upskill, training-of-the-trainers (ToT) summer courses lasting a fortnight have been conducted annually by the Translators Association of China (TAC). From their inception in 2004, these focused on pedagogy but as of 2009 have also incorporated interpreting skills development training for instructors, “an important feature added to help address the need of non-professional interpreters … teaching in the new MTI programs” (Bao 2015: 410).

Despite the fact that most students will have learned their foreign language in school in China without any overseas exposure, the MTI Interpreting curriculum does not include B-language enhancement as either a compulsory or elective course, even though Chinese Language and Culture is compulsory and a Second Foreign Language course is available as an elective (CNMTI 2011). Nor is there any stipulation that native speakers of the foreign language (co-)teach interpreting classes into that language. Only a small number of programmes appear to have recruited, on their own initiative, native speakers to co-teach interpreting classes and/or offer language enhancement modules.5

Similarly, according to a recent survey, just 2 per cent of MTI programmes offer a module in professional ethics (Zhao, Li & Mu 2021: 27).

Finally, the MTI framework does not include end-of-course qualification tests. Instead, students obtain their degree by completing their coursework and an internship, and defending a 15,000 character thesis (either research-based or reportage on a translation or interpreting assignment) (CNMTI 2011). In recognition of the desirability of test-based gatekeeping to ensure that graduates can actually perform to a professional standard, there have been calls from scholars in China to require MTI interpreting students to obtain certification at Level Two in the China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI, see below) as a mandatory requirement for graduation, but this has not yet been adopted in any school.

To understand the rationale behind this extraordinary scaling-up of interpreter training in China, it is important to appreciate that Western typologies of interpreting (community, court, conference, etc.) often fail to account for the category that makes up the lion’s share of interpreting practice in China: in-house interpreting (mostly consecutive) performed by generalist T&I practitioners (often with other job duties) in support of routine interactions with overseas partners. Demand for trained practitioners who can work reliably at this level has grown significantly as China’s engagement with the outside world has deepened. Training interpreters at this level of competence to meet this kind of demand can be seen as the main, but not exclusive, (implicit) objective of the MTI.

Prior to the establishment of the MTI (and BTI, the Bachelor of Translation and Interpreting), T&I practitioners were largely educated in university language departments, with limited practical training in interpreting skills, and much of their course load devoted to literature, linguistics, and theory. Against this background, the MTI represents a potential step forward with its intended emphasis on practical skills training. However, the MTI’s quality controls seem excessively loose, especially as regards instructor qualifications, students’ foreign language proficiency, and ability to interpret to a professional standard upon graduation, which is not tested.

From the perspective of the conference interpreting profession, it is a pity that conference interpreting is not carved out within the MTI scheme as a specialised major, to be offered only by a select subset of schools that qualify (Ren 2019) and benchmarked to international standards. Conference interpreting is not just a different ‘setting’, but a different level of practice with much higher requirements, as is recognised in CATTI, NAATI, and other certification schemes, and with its own mature training paradigm (AIIC 2021a; Diriker 2015; HINTS 2012; Mackintosh 1995). Similarly, the inclusion of simultaneous interpreting as a mandatory
subject for all MTI interpreting students is questionable, as it blurs the boundary with conference interpreting proper.

Since around 2010, boosted by this boom in supply, a large ‘language services industry’ has taken off in China, “entailing a somewhat different set of subcomponents of competence, and … a more multidimensional set of standards to judge what quality interpreting work is and what it means to be ethical” (Ren 2020: 17).

Professional practice

The Chinese government

The largest interpreting service within the Chinese government is the Translation and Interpretation Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). The department has a complement of roughly 80 full-time staff, originally covering only Chinese/English and Chinese/French, with the more recent addition of Chinese/Spanish and Chinese/Portuguese. Interpretation in other languages is provided by regional desks within the ministry. The department has a training division that provides intensive induction training and ongoing coaching for its staff, who may be recruited from postgraduate interpreting programmes or even directly from undergraduate studies, to be trained in-house.

The department has a long tradition of excellence in consecutive interpreting, providing rigorous training in note-taking skills (see Ahrens & Orlando, Chapter 3, in this volume) and emphasising “accurate, complete and high-quality expression” (Lei 2006: 157). Simultaneous interpreting has come into more intensive use since around 2012, including for some bilateral summits which previously had been interpreted consecutively. MoFA interpreters also staff the Chinese booth at diplomatic conferences such as G20 and APEC.

Other central government ministries also maintain smaller (in the range of around 10–15 person) interpretation services, notably the Ministry of Commerce, which handles trade-related international engagement, but also various line ministries such as the Ministry of Agriculture. Several provincial-level Foreign Affairs Offices also have similarly sized translation and interpretation divisions that employ professionally trained conference interpreters.

The private market

With the enlargement of training over the past decade, the supply of interpreters of all kinds has ballooned, feeding a highly fragmented private market featuring “wide ranges of competence and pricing” (Chen 2019). Since 2010, the market has absorbed a massive influx of graduates from expanded legacy programmes, from the new MTI programmes, from two-semester MA conference interpreting courses in the UK (producing around 70–80 Chinese/English graduates each year, most of whom return to China), and from Australia and the US, as well as trainees from private training agencies and self-taught practitioners.

The conference interpreting market today is clearly stratified, with different groups of interpreters offering different levels of quality and commanding different levels of fees. For highly competent and experienced professionals, the swelling of supply has resulted in “relative stagnation” of fees and working conditions (Chen 2019); here, as elsewhere, “their status and working conditions tend to be dragged down by interpreters … at lower levels rather than the other way around” (Gile 1995: 2).

Interestingly, the early market that budded in Beijing and Shanghai from the 1990s through the 2000s was ab initio a relatively professionalised one, because the first conference interpreters
who took the leap into the private market, as full- or part-time freelancers, were “credentialed, experienced” professionals, many trained in the UN programme, some in Brussels, and most with experience in the UN system and/or as staff interpreters in major government ministries (Dawrant & Jiang 2001). This community of practice, “with the local AIIC members taking the lead, [made] relentless efforts in promoting the profession and advocating and communicating best practices” (Dawrant & Jiang 2001).

This community has continued to develop and maintain its distinctive features through to the present. The majority of its members are now full-time freelancers, trained in ‘best practice’ conference interpreting programmes, and an increasing number have joined AIIC. AIIC membership is increasingly recognised as a mark of quality and professionalism and has even been listed as a recognised qualification in public tender documents issued by government bodies procuring conference interpreting services.

But the explosive growth of China’s ‘language service industry’ from around 2010 onward (Ren 2020: 15), supported on the supply side by the new MTI programmes, has created a much larger market organised on the principle of mass supply, without effective quality controls. In terms of Tseng’s classic sociological model of professionalisation in conference interpreting (Tseng 1992), this now much larger market is in the first phase of development—‘market disorder’—characterised by lack of quality control and fierce price competition, with clients demanding quality services “troubled by the fact that they do not know where to get qualified practitioners”, and “training schools [that] vary considerably in their admission standards, duration of training, curricula and the qualifications of graduates and instructors” and that “over-supply the market with excessive numbers of practitioners” (Tseng 1992: 44–46).

As a result, it has been observed that in China’s conference interpreting market today, “there is always something for your budget. Any budget.” (Chen 2019). Because of intense competition for limited interpreting opportunities, it is difficult even for the best-qualified beginners to make a living as full-time freelance conference interpreters. The majority therefore find other employment, often as in-house translators and interpreters, and take conference interpreting assignments as a side-line activity, as repeatedly seen in survey research (Han 2016; Li 2018; Setton & Guo 2011).

**Geography, languages, and demographics**

Conference interpreting activity continues to be concentrated in the first-tier cities of Beijing and Shanghai, with a smaller market in the South (Guangzhou, Shenzhen) and a nascent one in the West (Chongqing, Chengdu). Practice is bidirectional, with virtually all practitioners interpreting both ways between native Chinese and one acquired foreign language. English is overwhelmingly the largest, followed by ‘small languages’, as they are called (xiaoyuzhong), like French, Japanese, Korean, and Russian. The foreign language is almost always acquired in China, through education and self-study. On average, fewer than one in five interpreters have lived for more than a month or two outside China (Setton 2011), though among top-level conference interpreters the percentage with overseas education and significant international exposure is much higher. For multilingual meetings, Chinese is commonly used as the relay language (see Bartłomiejczyk & Stachowiak-Szymczak, Chapter 2 in this volume), even between closely related foreign languages like English and French.

Recent survey research (Han 2016) provides a profile of currently active Chinese/English conference interpreters in the market at large: a majority of women (two-thirds), relatively young (two-thirds from 26–35 years of age), with postgraduate education (three-quarters with a master’s degree, over half in interpreting) but limited SI experience (half with no more than...
three years). Interpreting was a side-line activity for 45 per cent of the sample, who hold down a regular (non-interpreting) job and take outside interpreting assignments on a part-time basis; 40 per cent were fully freelance, and 15 per cent were staff interpreters. Although the sampling was not random, the survey’s findings corroborate the observation that the “influx of new graduates from domestic and overseas interpreting programs has … resulted in a younger and less experienced workforce, willing to work more flexibly” (Han 2016: 268).

**Technical and working conditions**

SI systems are generally modern digital systems (e.g. Bosch, Taiden) of recent vintage in good working order. But mobile booths commonly in use are lightweight, cramped, and provide virtually no sound insulation. ‘Ventilation’ means opening the door if there is one, or drawing open a curtain. Due to cut-throat competition, equipment rental fees in mainland China are around just one-quarter of rental fees in neighbouring markets (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan). There is little movement toward ISO-standard booths, due to the unwillingness of clients and agencies (and interpreters who resell equipment rental as part of a package service) to pay ‘extra’.

With a few exceptions, the majority of venues with fixed booths are not ISO compliant. It is quite common to encounter fixed booths that do not offer a view of the speakers and proceedings. In the worst cases, these can be little more than unventilated closets, sometimes with one small monitor showing either slides or the speaker/conference hall, but not both.

Bidirectional interpreting from one booth is the dominant set-up for simultaneous interpreting in China. Per international professional standards (e.g. AIIC 2015, 2021), under this set-up, default team strength for full-day meetings should be three interpreters in each booth. In recent years, this practice has come under pressure as a result of interpreters who routinely work in teams of two (or perhaps alone), even for intensive, full-day, technical meetings.

It continues to be true that “signing a contract [is not] an established practice” for the majority of freelance interpreters in China (Dawrant & Jiang 2001). Working conditions often depend on the degree of awareness and competence of conference organisers. A frequent problem is non-availability of speaker texts, especially in the case of government officials who read dense official prose at impossibly fast speeds. Intellectual property rights in the interpretation are generally overlooked: in one notorious case, a technology company ostensibly demonstrating its cutting-edge machine translation SI solution at a large conference was discovered to be transcribing a human interpreter’s output and re-voicing it using voice generation software (Ng 2018). Payment cycles in the private market can be many months long, with intermediaries delaying payment in the absence of any contractual late-payment penalty.

**Professional association and code of ethics**

A key milestone in the professionalisation of a conference interpreting market is the establishment of a professional association that enforces a code of ethics and practice (Tseng 1992; see also Dam & Gentile, Chapter 21 in this volume). There is currently no domestic professional association of conference interpreters in China that admits members, by testing or on dossier, based on their competence and professionalism, or that enforces a code of ethics and practice.

The Translators Association of China (TAC), a government-organised NGO (‘GONGO’), broadly represents and provides guidance for the T&I industry. Under its auspices, a Specification on Translation Service—Part 2: Interpretation (GB/T 19363.2-2006) was adopted in 2006 (SAC 2006) for the voluntary observance of service providers. This document does not prescribe detailed standards for conference interpreting, covering working conditions,
team strengths, etc., and is not widely known among agencies (or interpreters). A generic *Code of Professional Ethics for Translators and Interpreters in China* was recently adopted by TAC (TAC 2019), but without an enforcement mechanism even for TAC’s members.

In the absence of a domestic professional association, AIIC is filling the gap effectively in the premium market. This is the only grouping of interpreters bound by an enforceable code of ethics, including professional secrecy, and by professional standards of practice. A Chinese-language Weibo public account (with over 43,000 followers at the time of writing) is maintained by AIIC’s Asia Pacific region, which has also produced Chinese-language videos and other educational content on best practices in conference interpreting. In June 2020, a Chinese-language AIIC webinar on best practices for remote interpreting (see Seeber & Fox, Chapter 35, in this volume) attracted over 600 attendees—probably the largest-ever meeting of Chinese conference interpreters, online or offline.

**Certification**

A second key milestone in the process of professionalisation is the institution of accreditation or certification as a precondition for market entry (Tseng 1992). In China, mandatory test-based certification linked to graduation is today a feature in only three conference interpreting programmes (UIBE, SISU, and GDUFS), as discussed above.

In the market at large, voluntary test-based certification in interpreting is available through several schemes, the best-known being the China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI) organised under the auspices of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MHRSS). One of the world’s largest T&I certification programmes, CATTI certifies interpreters between Chinese and seven foreign languages. CATTI describes itself as “the most authoritative translation and interpretation proficiency accreditation test, … implemented throughout the country according to uniform standards and in compliance with the national system of professional qualification certificates” (CATTI 2019).

CATTI interpreter certification is available at three levels in consecutive:

- Level Three, the lowest, roughly corresponding to liaison or dialogue interpreter.
- Level Two, roughly corresponding to professional interpreter, such as for in-house settings.
- Level One, for fully-fledged conference interpreting in the consecutive mode.

For simultaneous interpreting, CATTI now offers only one level of test, ‘Simultaneous’, targeted at conference interpreting in the simultaneous mode.

Overall, CATTI seems to be functioning primarily “as a require[ment] for promotion within the civil service” (Setton & Guo 2011: 91) and for in-house employment in public institutions and state-owned enterprises.

At the level of conference interpreting, this optional certification “has not yet taken on a gatekeeping role in regulating access to professional practice” (Han & Slatyer 2016: 232) and there appears to be limited incentive for established freelance professionals to take the test. Unlike certification bodies overseas such as NAATI, CATTI does not publish a directory or database of the interpreters it has passed with their levels of certification and their contact details, and therefore provides no value in terms of connecting demand and supply in the market.

In terms of its validity and reliability as a certification test of interpreter performance, CATTI is impossible to evaluate due to the paucity of available information on its test specifications, scoring system, the qualifications of its examiners (including whether they include native
speakers of the foreign languages concerned), or the level of scoring precision and decision consistency achieved. As no test validation research has been published, it is unclear if CATTI’s developers themselves have accumulated and documented validity evidence in a systematic manner (see Dawrant & Han, Chapter 20 in this volume).

**Language specificity**

Chinese is “exceptionally difficult” to learn for native speakers of English (or other European languages), typically taking 2,200 class hours to reach just “Speaking-3/Reading-3” on the Interagency Language Roundtable scale (USDS 2020)—roughly equivalent to just B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), still far below the standard of a B (or even C) language for conference interpreting. Understandably, the number of Western language-A, Chinese-B conference interpreters is vanishingly small. Just as in written translation, then, if “[working from the] mother tongue into a foreign language has long been regarded in the profession … throughout the world as the ‘wrong choice’, for Chinese translators, it has almost been the only choice” (Huang 2015: 48).

Intriguingly, interpreters working with Chinese—whether as an A or B language—often seem to prefer to work into rather than from Chinese (Setton 1993: 241), possibly due to inherent language- and culture-specific difficulties that may make Chinese more challenging as a source language than as a target language.

The best-known challenge is word order differences between Chinese and English (and other Western languages) which potentially impose a large burden on working memory (see Hodzik & Williams, Chapter 26 in this volume), entailing the risk of “failure sequences” (Gile 1995: 174–176). While word order differences are salient in both directions, they may be more manageable in the English-Chinese direction because right-branching structures in English can often be segmented effectively into acceptable Chinese—indeed, chunking and linear rendering were among the most important techniques taught at the UNTPIT (Wu 1994: 92–93; Zhong 1984). In contrast, left-branching Chinese structures frequently do not allow for easy chunking or linear rendering and instead require the interpreter to wait for the headword, or at least sufficient context to make an intelligent guess (Dawrant 1996). Such challenges tend to be more concentrated in written texts with long sentences and complex syntax, but can and do crop up in extemporaneous speech.

Recent empirical research has confirmed that these kinds of “grammatical differences [do] have a statistically significant impact on the interpreting performance of both professionals and students” (Wang 2014: 1), in both English-Chinese and Chinese-English simultaneous interpreting. The simultaneous interpretations of sentences with divergent structures exhibited significantly more meaning errors (omissions and distortions), more grammatical errors, and more delivery corrections than sentences with compatible structures (Wang 2014: 260).

Other notable challenges that may contribute to the difficulty of interpreting from Chinese into Western languages include the absence of explicit marking in Chinese of tense, number, gender, and definiteness; the allowable omission of sentence topics/subjects and logical links; compactness of expression; the use of classical and literary language, drawing on thousands of years of culture with no direct Western parallel; and the fluidity of the language standard (Setton 1993).

**Interpreting research**

Interpreting Studies (IS) has a history of four decades in China, but was established as a formal academic discipline only in 2004—the ‘annus mirabilis’ of interpreting research globally.
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(Pöchhacker 2011: 7)—with the launch of the first three PhD programmes (at BFSU, SISU, and GDUFS). Since then, the volume of publications has grown remarkably, making China one of the world’s biggest producers of IS literature.

The development of IS in China has been documented in several historical reviews (e.g. Ren, Guo & Huang 2019; Wang 2018) and in a comparatively high number of bibliometric and scientometric studies (e.g. Ren & Huang 2021; Wang & Mu 2009; Xu 2015, 2017), “an approach that seems to have generated more interest in China than the West” (Gile 2019). Across all Chinese journals in the China Academic Journals Full-text Database (CAJ), around 8,000 papers on interpreting have been published to date. A bibliometric study of papers in CSSCI and CORE-indexed journals, the top-tier academic journals in China, found output to have grown from 10 per year in the 1990s, first to around 30 and on to 100 in the 2000s, stabilising at 80 or 90 in the 2010s (Wang 2015).

Before 2010, just three topics accounted for two-thirds of the total output captured in the CAJ: interpreter training, techniques, and general theory. Many articles consisted of “introductions, reviews or borrowings of theories or research results from the West” (Wang & Mu 2009: 278). From 2010 onwards, output has continued to be dominated by theoretical discussion, but with more diversified themes, including critical reflection on influential theories, conceptualisation of new theories, and more focused discussion of specific training topics. A small but growing strand of empirical studies has also emerged on topics such as cognitive processing, working memory, pauses, and anxiety.

A recent qualitative review of 47 PhD dissertations (Mu, Wang & Xu 2016) offers an indication of the current state of empirical research. Most of the dissertations reviewed did adopt an empirical approach, with the most common topics relating to the interpreting process, theory, product, pedagogy, and the interpreter’s role. But based on their analysis of this corpus, the investigators identified a pattern of methodological weaknesses. Problems observed included “lack of methodological awareness, vague exposition of the research method employed, lack of scientific rigour in the research design, tenuous approaches to data analysis, and inadequate theoretical elaboration” (Mu, Wang & Xu 2016: 108, our translation). The authors conclude that these deficiencies “to a definite extent jeopardised the validity of the dissertations’ findings” and recommend that PhD programmes place much stronger emphasis on providing systematic training in research methodology.

Unfortunately, there have also been recent reports of plagiarism in Chinese Interpreting Studies (Pöchhacker & Liu 2021; Science & Technology Daily 2018) involving some prominent players.

If so far, many papers “do not seem to offer much innovation” for an international audience (Gile 2019: 2), the situation may be poised to change. Overseas, the UK and Australia have become productive environments for PhD students from China. As Daniel Gile points out, “an increasing number of Chinese authors [now] write in English and work in cooperation with researchers from other countries …, [producing] good research which draws the attention of international readers” (2019: 2), especially when it is published in international peer-reviewed journals.

Notes
1 For reasons of space, this chapter does not cover conference interpreting in Hong Kong, Macao, or Taiwan.
2 Now Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU).
3 An earlier article (Dawrant & Jiang 2001) gave the figure of 98. This has been revised to 108 here in light of new archival information (BFSU 2019). This is the number of official UN trainees who
completed the course in both the Chinese/English and Chinese/French combinations and passed the UN exam. It does not include ‘auditing students’: during the later years of the programme, with lower projected demand for new interpreters at the UN, intake of official UN trainees was reduced, opening up some positions on the course for students already employed by central government agencies. These auditors were not entitled to take the UN exam at the end of the course. Several of them later passed the UNLCE and became UN staff interpreters.

4 The information in this section is based on interviews with colleagues who recently served as visiting scholars on the EUCITP.

5 Qualified native-speaker instructors are routinely employed by major language and literature programmes.

6 In practice, the latter is strongly encouraged.

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English-language works


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Han, Chao & Slatyer, Helen 2016. Test validation in interpreter certification performance testing. *Interpreting* 18 (2), 231–258.


**Chinese-language works**


