

# **Learning to Communicate Globally Enhances the Empowerment of Highly-educated Professional Older Women in Rural China**

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper explores why learning to communicate globally can contribute to the empowerment of older highly-educated female professionals. The hypothesis is that speaking English, the current global language, will contribute to cross-cultural competence, which will help this category of women in the endeavor to obtain and keep a leading position in a booming, yet still very male-dominated, 21st century China.

Mastering a western language is a real challenge for these women, who have been socialized in Maoist China. The challenge specifically involves finding words for concepts that are often unfamiliar and culturally very different. The challenge also involves a decision to experience “loss of face” by having to learn new societal skills, while loss of face as a cultural norm should be avoided by all means in China, more than ever after the traumatizing experiences during the Cultural Revolution

These women, roughly between 35 and 55, have spent their youth during “from-feudalism-liberated” Maoist China, starting in 1949. China is a country still permeated with the traditional cultural values and norms derived from 2000 years of Confucianist-prescribed subservient female gender-roles. Feeling free to express themselves in a global communication language will empower these women as female leaders and professionals in their rapidly internationalizing jobs. Hospitals, universities, governments are “opening up” to learn from western and southern methods and strategies. Those professionals who speak some English have a better chance to travel outside the country, those who don’t will stay “inside”. Whereas women in China were condemned traditionally to stay inside, caring for the private sphere, in these days they have the chance and the challenge to enter the public world by international communicative skills.

The paper recommends special educational opportunities for older women already in leadership positions. Education was very poor in Maoist China. Roughly 30 to 60 years ago the only school system was social life Party-education. For ideological reasons those already well-educated went through punitive “loss of face” experiences. As daughters of intellectuals then, the older professionals now have to deal somehow with the punitive denial of their educational needs in formative youthful years. In rapidly booming China, economically, culturally and psychologically the public position of these professional women could easily decline again, compared to what was gained in equality for men and women in private and public life in Maoist China. Now that public life has become increasingly economically and internationally oriented, the natural tendency in China since Mencius (372 BC-289 BC) – to assume that women stay at home in order to care for their families including their busy enterprising outgoing husbands – gets new rational strengthening. Not speaking the language needed for that modern public life could easily contribute to the deterioration of public, “outside” career opportunities.

My findings during one year of living and teaching in a north-western province in rural China and subsequent further study have resulted in this exploratory paper. More research has to

be conducted. Although many girls and daughters have better public opportunities and rights in modern China for career development than their mothers and certainly their grandmothers ever had, thanks partly to the efforts and policy of the CCCP government, which reflect the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) millennium goals from the UN, empowering these (grand)mothers, often categorized as the “lost generation”, would certainly stimulate further emancipation of women and their careers.

## **2. Finding and stating the problem**

Several experiences motivated me to write this paper, first presented at the 30th IFUW Triennial conference: “Education, Empowerment and Development” 5-9 August 2010 in Mexico City, with the help of a grant from the Dutch affiliate of IFUW.

Most important were the in-depth anthropological participant observation and study of the academic year 2008-2009, when I worked and lived in Ningxia, being the only European woman around and one of a very small number of foreigners in the capital of this Autonomous Hui Province: Yinchuan. Pursuing this year of teaching in China had been inspired by conversations with modern Chinese in 2007 during a six-week journey through inland China by public transportation with my sophomore daughter. I was totally flabbergasted then by the national energetic atmosphere, comparing this booming China with what I had learned in 1986 during half a year observing daily life in a China, at that time just opened up by Deng Xiao Ping.

My initial experience with the world of Chinese women was in my very first job in vocational education in the eastern rural part of the Netherlands in 1975. Young 14 and 15-year old girls were allowed at that time to work under condition of attending school for two days. Schools specialized in coaching these young women in their general societal development. It was customary at that time in working class families to finish schooling after 7 or 8 years and certainly girls had to contribute to the family income. We, educators, went in person to the factories and other work places to bring the young workers into the classroom when they didn't show up. We never managed to get hold on that one rare Chinese girl who should be coming to our school according to Dutch law. The employer, owner of the restaurant and probably a family member, made it clear that he wasn't willing to understand our intentions and very politely but decisively closed the door. The local government had registered a young Chinese girl, but we never saw her. She was invisible. Neighbors told us she worked in the kitchen restaurant and came out only rarely. Invisible and marginalized as Chinese girls were, and still happen to be, according to the findings of Elizabeth Croll (2000), Brownell and Wasserstrom, (2002)

Thirty-five years later I recalled this, reading the diary of Ma Yan, a Chinese girl in the poor north-western province of Ningxia. In the academic year 2008-2009, teaching at a university in Yinchuan, I was confronted with the extreme poverty in the rural parts of the province, which prevented children, most of them girls, from accessing education. French journalist Pierre Haski (2003) gives a desolate report of how poverty in the rural areas in China is still preventing young women from the education and life they want so much. Instead they pay traditional respect and filial piety to their hard working parents, who are almost never home because of immigrant labor in the wealthier cities, labor that should feed their children (rural people may have more than one child, preferably a boy included) and should enable their study in junior high school, long walking hours away. The local transport, a tractor mainly, is sometimes too expensive: the price 1 Yuan (about 1 cent) must be saved for books and pencils and an apple. When the mother of Ma Yan, dedicated to a better future of her

daughter, becomes ill, the girl has practical and psychological reasons to quit school while her brother may remain. She is, as everybody takes for granted, responsible for the caretaking of the joint family household. It is perceived as a good learning environment to practice future female tasks. In China the daughters care for parents, grand-parents as well as parents-in-law after marriage. In a junior-high school in the countryside where I was asked to lecture about the importance of studying English for a good future, the total number of children continuing study in senior-high at that moment was 13%. Most of them were boys.

In rapidly changing China, 2000 years of daughter-discrimination is a hard nut to crack, as even the present government finds, although all kinds of measures should guarantee that literacy improves. For instance, vocational education for young workers is set up everywhere now and school and books are now free for the poor (PRC-UN Statement 2005). Nonetheless, though figures vary, it seems safe to assume that 20% of all women are still illiterate in China in 2010. According to the All Women's Movement 90% of all women were illiterate in 1949.

While living and working in a totally Chinese environment in rural Ningxia I learned to know several women who acted as friends and family in my sometimes lonely stay. I was there on my own and happened to be the only European woman in a province of 6.5 million Han-Chinese and (30% of total population) Hui-muslims, all speaking excellent Mandarin. The older educated people spoke Russian, which was taught as the second language in north-west China until 1992. Only a few spoke a very little English, studied from few and rather old-fashioned study books. In the urban area, in east coast cities like Qingdao, Shanghai, Beijing, business and school contact with the English language and its speakers had already started in the 80s. This explains somewhat the general poor level of English I was confronted with in the north-west and certainly the lack of language ability I noticed when trying to make contact with people of my age, background and interests. My Mandarin was too poor as well then, so there was a lot of mutual smiling. All day, young kids and young students, young teachers and doctors, the so called generation 80, 90 and 00 came to practise English with me. I became more and more eager to communicate with their teachers, doctors, mothers and other professionals, born in the 50s, 60s, and 70s in Maoist China.

In the development of our friendship the older professionals in Ningxia started to speak to me, at first shyly and carefully and always with the aid of a digital or hard-copy dictionary, but slowly more freely in a mixture of English and Chinese. I seemed not too threatening for them, able to co-switch between different languages and thought systems and having many shortcomings in standard English, not being a native English speaker, as well as struggling openly with my Mandarin. They opened up and dared to make mistakes in expressing thoughts and questions. (Opening-up is national idiom in China nowadays, it is used everywhere to define the cultural spirit).

In these small but very intense conversations I discovered that their cognitive knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar was much richer than they showed in public. Whenever there was a public need to use the English language, the younger teachers and doctors with whom we were always surrounded immediately took over. The younger were apparently helping their bosses and older colleagues, while these kept smiling and didn't even try to speak a word. While the verbal English of the younger colleagues was far from perfect, they didn't mind making mistakes, so it seemed. Respect for the elderly and hierarchically appropriate behavior is everything in China and emotions, certainly the negative ones, are not shown. So it took a while before I was able to ascertain what was happening here.

I assumed that the normal respect for the older professionals was expressed by preventing them from “losing face”, a traditional Chinese psychological and cultural “Thou shalt not” social law, terribly jeopardized during the Cultural Revolution. Even uncomfortable feelings towards having to communicate in a foreign language they didn’t master would cause loss of face and would need to be prevented as much as possible by the respectful young. Nevertheless the older professionals seemed even more conscious of not being able to master that modern language, the words and the phrases, as well as the cultural behavior belonging to that global western language: behavior such as speaking up at will as an individual, not hindered by prescribed “follow always the group” norms, not sticking out as an individual. Coming from another culture where independent thinking and acting is highly valued, I discovered, while slowly getting acculturated into rural China, that there is not even a good Mandarin translation for the English word “individual”!

Once this problem of lack of competence with respect to using the English language was discovered in the course of daily intercultural communication, I started thinking and studying why these older female professionals – having leading positions in the hospitals, universities, government, being smart, highly educated, very capable women – did not do everything in their power to learn English, to become adequately educated for modern times. When they were willing to learn new things like computer skills, what was the source of their obvious lack of courage to learn to communicate in English or Chinglish, the common mixture of Chinese and English, while they pushed their much younger colleagues, raised in modern China after 1980, to study hard?

I found that the Mencius-past was still a ubiquitous present within them, and also that modern China is so much future-oriented that those women seemed in a way trapped. They had no opportunity during the Cultural Revolution for regular schooling, they had no time now and they were not used at all to being ambitious for the personal career development demanded in modern times. They had been socialized in a time when everything had to be useful for the communist country. Intellectuals and education were suspect in a communist country where Mao Tse Tung had dismissed two thousand critical university professors in 1957, the very start of the Cultural Revolution. These women should have had a different intellectual life: now they wanted and had to care for their daughters’ education. The sometimes-extreme pressure to succeed in the national examinations is accepted because of the over-riding feeling that it is wonderful to be able to study when you have the right brains for it. Everything is done for the future of the children.

This is another very traditional Confucianist Chinese assumption: once a woman is married and has a child her learning time has finished. She should be responsible for the future of the young. These cultural expectations seem very different from the lifelong learning ideology and educational structures espoused in the last 50 years in some western countries. Youth must study now that it is allowed to do so in modern Chinese society. And the older female professionals are busy, having to care for their extended family, in addition to their modernizing, demanding jobs – jobs that will be quit when they are fifty-five, the Chinese retirement age. They have spent all their educational time and youth in a period when the opportunities were limited, and now that China is booming and the sky is the limit, their opportunities to grow seem threatened again by societal circumstances. Practically there is very little personal spare time left to undertake something empowering for themselves. The GDP in rural areas is still one third of the urban income. Compared to the opportunities many other (western) professionals have nowadays, there is a big gap, preventing any global exchange.

### **3. Master Class as Action-Research**

Being there, observing this, I tested the readiness of some of these older professionals for setting up a special master class in international communication. I explained that I felt uncomfortable in those conversations where the younger ones were bypassing the older leaders whom I was trying to address. I tried successfully to motivate and to stimulate them, stressing the modeling and career advantages for themselves and their daughters of global language competency. After some time and much social networking and lobbying, we finally managed to start the first master class on Sunday morning very early.

It was helpful to suggest that foreigners in international contact, which is increasing all over China, wouldn't understand why these normally so-polite young teachers and doctors were not restricted at all in a communicative atmosphere with foreigners, while the older professionals, the leaders, kept silent; that in the global area one would expect leaders, the female ones as well, to speak for themselves. That, for societal "face" reasons it might be contributing and worthwhile to be a student again. That "losing face" in the short term by learning to speak English would result in the end in gaining "face" for all through their presenting in vocational training acquired skills in international communication.

According to Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim (2003), intercultural communication is "a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures". As soon as I enter a classroom to "train students to speak English" I enter into their minds and traditional attitudes, which, for instance, include in traditional China "no speaking when the teacher is lecturing". To reach my goal, my students needed to deal with the uncertainty that goes along with exploring new behavior in an unknown structure. They had to speak, come what might! That was the only way to learn to communicate globally. Losing face was a condition of learning what was aimed at. When such behavior happens in a safe environment and when it is hierarchically ordered by the teacher, it becomes an assignment, and as such it is less seen as a personal humiliation. And while acting in this very unfamiliar, uncertain field, speaking new words expressing unknown behavior, the women empower themselves, using language as a means to bridge cultures. It is easier to say "no" to tradition in a second language than in your first language.

### **4. Preliminary Conclusion**

As a result, we had a really valuable course, so that participants wanted to continue in an advanced course which we set at dinner time on a week day evening. On the basis of evaluations and feedback, I was even more convinced by these experiences that vocational schooling for highly-educated professionals really could add to their position and power in contemporary China.

Cultural, linguistic, psychological, socio-historical and organizational aspects always interplay in the act of learning to speak a foreign language. For these Chinese women, with their very specific history, there is a different learning-attitude and a different learning-path from those relevant to, for instance, elementary school kids, raised in a modern Chinese world where English language is now one of the most wanted societal skills. English is taught in all schools from Kindergarten on. Every university degree includes certain standard levels of English. Watching Western movies is totally accepted, internet cafes are available even in the poorest rural areas.

The opening-up of China to the world only took place from 1979 on. In the poorer Northwest, where I was allowed to work and observe, there are fewer than twenty years - from 1992 on - in which a few western foreigners have come to teach in the universities and schools for the improvement of spoken English. Contact with the wider world is still limited, certainly for those who don't master the skills of communicating in global English.

Pursuing further study and research on this modern-times Chinese emancipation issue of empowering older female professionals in rural areas by supporting them to learn to communicate globally is timely and needed. Many things change rapidly in China, much stays as it was always. But, as Mao Tse Tung repeatedly said, half the sky is carried by women and could be owned by them.

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