

# Will Chinese (Putonghua) Replace English as a Global Language in the Next Century?

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## Abstract

As China's economic power continues to grow, its economy, politics, culture, and education continue to influence the world. Previous studies have discussed whether Chinese can replace English as a global language, but not the specific challenges of learning Chinese. This paper will compare whether the Chinese language possesses these qualities by examining how English has evolved into a language of global influence politically, economically, culturally, and educationally. This paper can provide a reference on whether Chinese is the dominant language of instruction or English-medium education. At the same time, the possibility of Chinese as a global language can be assessed by comparing whether Chinese possesses certain characteristics of a global language.

**Keywords:** Chinese (Putonghua), English as a global language

## 1. Introduction

With the rise of China as an economic force to be reckoned with in the world today (Arrighi, 2007), China's influence on the world is growing. Especially when COVID-19, a rare human disaster in the world, swept the world, the Chinese government took active measures to prevent the spread of the epidemic. China's economic prosperity cannot be separated from its constant exposure to the world. Its steadily increasing status and role in international affairs have prompted much discussion and debate about the Chinese language, especially whether it can replace English as a global language. (Gil, 2011)

This paper aims to examine whether Chinese currently possess a global language's

characteristics by comparing it with English. Examining how English has developed into a globally influential language in terms of politics, economics, culture, and education will compare whether Chinese possesses these qualities. It concludes that Chinese has the characteristics to become a global language in terms of its economic and political influence. However, in terms of education, Chinese cannot replace English as a global language because China is engaged in promoting English learning. By comparing the regions where English and Chinese are spoken from the perspective of social context. Elaborating on learning Chinese is a challenge. It concludes that although Chinese meets some of the characteristics of a global language, English as a global language may not be replaced in the next century.

## 2. Literature Review

English is widely recognized as the world's lingua franca. English is the first global language, and no other language has the same status as English has in the world today (Crystal, 2006; Romaine, 2006; Svartvik & Leech, 2006). In our globalized world today, English plays a dominant role in almost all fields. (Rao, 2019). In every country throughout the world, foreigners are learning English to converse across borders in a language that others most likely understand. (Ning, 2010) A language can only achieve genuinely global status if it develops a unique role recognized in every country. (Crystal, 2012) In this case, when a country has many people who speak a language as a first language, then that language has a unique role. The ability of a language to become a global language has to do with the power of the people who speak it. So it involves political, military, technological, economic, and cultural aspects. (Crystal, 2012)

Unlike the spread of Chinese, the spread of English was due to colonialism related to the 17th to 18th centuries. (HAQ & Smadi, 1996) The British colonized overseas and established several colonies. As the colonies developed economically and socially, the colonized people began to develop a sense of native origin and eventually declared independence or established autonomous governments and became independent or semi-independent countries. Then, English became an official language in some countries where most of the population is regarded as their native language. (Crystal, 2003). The Industrial Revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries was a significant event for the English language (Crystal, 2012). Britain was at the forefront of the industrial revolution. The power of technology contributed to the emergence of English as a communication tool for acquiring new industrial knowledge, which enhanced the international status of English. The 19th century witnessed the growth in the economic power of the United States, which had risen to become an economic and political superpower, and a significant increase in the number of English speakers in the world. In the 20th century, cultural power manifested itself in virtually all areas of life through America's sphere of influence. (Crystal, 2012) U.S. technological domination was spearheaded by the computer revolution that swept the world after World War II and in the 1980s and 1990s.

In politics, English is the official language in

international meetings, and all documents are printed in English. English plays an official or working role in most important international political meetings. (Crystal, 2012) In economic terms, most of the leading scientists and technicians in England during the Industrial Revolution communicated in English. Those who came to England and later to the United States to learn new technologies had to do so through English as a medium. (Crystal, 2012) It follows that economic power also affects the spread of language. In terms of culture, English is pervasive in almost every aspect of people's lives. The Grand Canal motorboat stops are broadcast in Italian and English. Broadcasts at airports and aircraft are usually in English, used only for communication between the cockpit and the command tower. (Northrup, 2013) There has never been a language more widely spoken in the world than English today. (Melitz, 2016).

Advertisements, posters, electronic displays, and even product instructions are all annotated in English as international markets grow; the growth of the film and television industry has led to the release of Hollywood blockbusters in theaters worldwide 80 percent of these films are shown in English. (Dyja, 2005) All pop music record labels originated in English. When modern pop music came, it was almost entirely an English scene, and from the 1960s onwards, the mass audience for pop artists originated from all over the world. No single source spread English so quickly to young people around the world. (Crystal, 2012) In education, English is the medium through which a great deal of the world's knowledge is spread, especially in science and technology, where knowledge acquisition is the primary purpose of education. English language education is important for current and future language policymakers, language educators as well as learners. (Pan, 2015).

Therefore, English has become a global language that is inextricably linked to its political, economic, cultural, and educational aspects. In contrast to Chinese, the fact is that China's economic power and political influence cannot be ignored in the international community, and China is becoming a superpower and is emphasizing the export of its culture abroad, for example, by building Confucius Institutes abroad. However, because of its long history of cultural output, English is widespread in most parts of the world. English is involved in every

aspect of people's lives. It is coupled with the fact that English's position in education is hard to shake. To some extent, it is difficult for Chinese to become a global language.

### 3. Language Policy in Education

English now enjoys unprecedented importance in Chinese contexts and is arguably more widely used and higher in status than ever before in its interactions with Mainland China. (Gil & Adamson, 2011)

English is now the undisputed language of science and technology, and scientific journals in many countries are now switching from their national languages to English. (Nunan, 2003) In Mainland China, English is listed as a required subject and is studied from the third grade onwards, which is still the majority of public schools; private schools may implement English instruction much earlier. Furthermore, there is a general gap between affluent coastal areas and inland areas. The impact of English as a lingua franca is considerable. University entrance requirements, career advancement prospects, curriculum, and published materials have all been affected. (Nunan, 2003) English plays an important role both in tertiary and primary education. In some urban international schools, many subjects are taught in English, including math and science. English as a compulsory subject in universities.

At some of the top universities in the city, English is used for instruction. Well-known institutions like Tsinghua University are required to publish academic journals in English. (Li & Zhang, 2003) English is also commonly used in international conferences and joint projects with foreign scholars. In contrast, Chinese scholars need to use English for academic communication to participate in overseas conferences or to publish in international journals that have gained reputation or promotion. (Gil & Adamson, 2011) It is evident that English is influential in academia, but it also has a significant impact on education in China. It is the medium of scholarly communication between China and the world.

### 4. Regions Where English and Chinese Are in Use

In terms of native speakers, Chinese is the most prominent language globally, spoken by more than 1 billion people. (Lyovin, 1997). Even though Chinese is not a common language, there are now more than twice as many Chinese

speakers as any other language. (Gil, 2011) However, the vast majority of these people are confined to mainland China (Ostler, 2005) and Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

In contrast, most people in post-transfer Hong Kong use Cantonese as a language primarily for informal situations. (Lai, 2010) If linguistic considerations determined language policy, then Chinese (Hokkien) would be the national language of Singapore, as the majority of the population uses it. However, the Singapore government has decided to adopt Malay as the national language, spoken by only 15% of the population. (Tsui et al., 1999) According to statistics, English now has some special administrative status in over 70 countries. English as a foreign language in over 100 countries (Crystal, 2012). The nearly 400 million native English speakers globally include the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and several other regions. (Crystal, 1998) Although Chinese speakers are numerically redundant with native English speakers, the worldwide distribution is limited. So, in its current form, English is accepted as the world's lingua franca in many parts of the world.

As the number of people of ethnic Chinese increases in all regions of the world, this has led to the use of Chinese in different regions of the world. Although not all Chinese speak Chinese, the language is widely spoken in areas other than China and the surrounding areas. (Gil, 2011) According to Zou & You (2001), there are between 8.65 million and 13.2 million native speakers of Chinese outside of China. Chinese and English are similar in that they both have many native speakers spread worldwide and are official languages of some status. However, compared to English, Chinese still has certain limitations. (Gil, 2011) And English has gained the status of a global language only because Putonghua is limited to a part of the world, while English is spread worldwide. Putonghua is limited to a part of the world, while English is spread all over the world. Even though Putonghua is the most spoken language globally, the Chinese are now learning English to expand their business worldwide. (Rao, 2019)

### 5. The Challenges of Learning Chinese (Putonghua)

It was not until the 1940s that Chinese teaching as a modern foreign language began to move

out of universities. In the past decade, the teaching of Chinese has expanded rapidly around the world. Chinese language programs in the United States have also been expanding. More than 152 universities and colleges offer Chinese language courses in France, and the number of courses is growing. (Cruickshank & Tsung, 2011) In some non-Chinese speaking countries, the enthusiasm for learning Chinese will also rise. (Wang, 2010) Chinese is also being promoted in Hong Kong and Singapore due to its prominent school language policies. In addition, since the Confucius Institute was established in 1987 by China's State Hanban, the Chinese language has become increasingly influential.

For non-native speakers, Chinese, with its complex linguistic system, seems to be the most difficult language in the world to learn. The American Academy of Diplomacy recently ranked the 70 most commonly used languages globally in terms of difficulty, and Chinese was ranked the most confusing. For foreigners who are new to the Chinese language, the most significant difficulty in learning Chinese is writing. Since Chinese characters are pictographs, many of them are written with minimal differences. Such as “刁,” “刀,” “刃,” “刃.” What is confusing is that these characters are superficially very similar, but they have entirely different pronunciations and meanings.

The second challenge in learning Chinese is pronunciation because the sounds and meanings of Chinese characters are disconnected, and different tones of the same pronunciation represent different meanings. For example, in the pronunciation of “ma,” the first tone is “妈,” which means mother, the second tone is “麻” which refers to a plant, the third tone is “马” which refers to an animal, and the fourth tone “骂” is a verb that means to insult someone with a rude or malicious word. Thus, the Chinese characters, sounds, and forms need to be learned systematically and are more complicated than English.

There are significant differences between the English and Chinese languages. For example, English focuses on alphabetic and phonetic while Chinese focuses on ideographic and phonetic. (Gil & Adamson, 2011) Like most European languages, English belongs to the Latin family and is interconnected, and they have many words with similar or even identical spellings. Moreover, English words are based on

any combination of the 26 letters of the alphabet and will be relatively better to learn than Chinese. About 60% of English words are of French, Latin, or Greek origin. (Webb & Nation, 2017) Therefore, people from European regions can learn English more quickly than learning Chinese.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, many factors shape the emergence of a language as a global language, including political agendas, economic developments, social contexts, educational policies, technological advances, and historical facts. In this paper, we discuss how English has developed into a global language to compare and analyze whether Chinese will become a global language in the next century. The comparison reveals that although China's political and economic influence is increasing year by year, China is also devoted to promoting Chinese culture to the world. At the same time, Putonghua is also sought after and widely used by many people. Putonghua, on the other hand, is only widely used in certain regions.

However, English influence the world began in the last few centuries and continues to be exported; the scope of the export covers all aspects of human life, especially in terms of education. English as a second language has influenced the development of education in China. Moreover, the acquisition of Chinese (Putonghua) is not a simple process; this makes many people feel frustrated to learn Chinese. Chinese is far from being a global language: as a native language of the country, it is less common; as an official language, it is less firmly established worldwide; and as a foreign language, it is less widespread. (Gil, 2011) Therefore, it does not seem feasible for Chinese to replace English as the only global language in the next century.

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