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The Russian Language in Modern Scientific and Educational Environment
RUSSIAN LANGUAGE FUNCTIONING IN THE EDUCATION
SYSTEM OF THE PRC

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Abstract

The article deals with the issue of the functional development of the Russian language within the PRC system of higher education in the 21st century in the context of Sino-Russian partnership. Factors influencing the high reputation of Russian in the outlook of the Chinese citizens are analyzed. The events during “Year of Russia in China” (2006) with the subsequent establishment of Russkiy Mir foundation in China and “Year of the Russian Language in China” (2009) increased the interest in learning Russian. Another factor increasing the number of educational programs in Russian is the proclaimed by Xi Jinping in the end of 2013 Belt and Road strategic initiative which was followed by the concept of “Big Russian language” implying the training of multi-skilled specialists acquiring the Russian language and interdisciplinary skills in the field of Russian studies. Nevertheless, there is much to be done in the process of cultivation interdisciplinary talents acquiring Russian, including the development of a sustainable approach towards the Russian language teaching reform and strengthening ties both between the universities of Russia and China and between the universities of China providing interdisciplinary education model.

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1. Introduction

Educational sphere is commonly known as one of the key spheres providing the development of a foreign language and a perfect channel for spreading the core values of the corresponding country in which the language has the status of a state / national one, thus, providing the implementation of the soft power. With the long history of cooperation between Russia and China which led to the establishment of the first Russian School within the Chinese civil service administrative system at the beginning of the 17th century Russian played an important role in the education system of China. In the context of close cooperation of Russia and China within the Communist bloc in the second half of the 20th century the spread of the Russian language in China reached its peak.

1.1. Teaching Russian in China in the second half of the 20th century

By 1951 there were 36 Russian departments at universities and 7 Russian colleges across China (Wang & Meng, 2005, p. 2). With the increasing demand for Russian speaking talents Beijing School of Russian evolved into Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages (today's Beijing Foreign Studies University), similarly Shanghai and Harbin Schools of Russian evolved into Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages (today's Shanghai International Studies University) and Harbin Institute of Foreign Languages (today's Heilongjiang University) correspondingly, thus becoming the main centers of Russian language and culture (Yan, 1999).

The period of Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) caused stagnation in the teaching of foreign languages in China and the subsequent period of ideological tension between the countries caused by the destalinization policy of N. Khrushchev negatively affected the functional development of Russian on the Chinese territory. With the proclamation of the "Reform and Opening Up" policy in China in 1978 there was a comeback to foreign languages education, nevertheless, in this sphere Russian gave way to other languages.

The important event in the history of teaching Russian in China in the 20th century was the establishment of Chinese Association of Russian Language and Literature Teachers (CAPRYAL) in 1981 in Shanghai with subsequent revitalization of Russian functioning in China. By the end of the 20th century there were 60 universities across China offering the major in Russian language for over 7000 students (Liu, 2011).

1.2. Legal Basis for the Russian language functioning in China in the 21st century

With the basic treaty of Sino-Russian relations in the 21st century "The Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation" of 2001 stating "mutual cooperation in all fields between the two countries", there arises the need for bilingual experts training (Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, 2001). This need gives rise to the vitality and functional development of the Russian and Chinese languages (especially for the latter due to its spread in all levels of the Russian system of education in recent years) in China and Russia correspondingly.

Apart from the above mentioned Treaty of 2001 “Sino-Russian Treaty of Cultural Cooperation” of 1992 provides “cooperation in learning and teaching of the Chinese language and literature in the Russian Federation and of the Russian language and literature in the People’s Republic of China” (Sino-Russian Treaty of Cultural Cooperation, 1992). Similar provisions are presented in the “Sino-Russian Treaty of Learning Russian on the Territory of the People’s Republic of China and Chinese on the Territory of the Russian Federation” of 2005 which is directly aimed at the promotion of Russian in China (Sino-Russian Treaty of Learning Russian on the Territory of the People’s Republic of China and Chinese on the Territory of the Russian Federation, 2005).

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Russian as a language of ethnic minority

At the same time, one should bear in mind that Russian *de jure* is considered to be the native language of the officially recognized Russian ethnic minority of the People’s Republic of China (amounts up to 15393 citizens according to the PRC census of 2010) (The Sixth National Population Census of the People's Republic of China, 2010). Nevertheless, on a nationwide scale Russian functions in China mainly as a foreign language with the status of the language of international communication.

2.2. Russian vs. English

Despite the stabilization period in the relations between Russia and China in the second half of the 20th century under the growing influence of the globalization process Russian gave way to English as a world language in many spheres of communication, including the educational one. Among the other reasons is the lack of practical application of language skills (Zhong, 2016, p. 89). Despite a large number of international contracts signed by the universities of Russia and China, the number of exchange students is relatively low with the majority learning Russian only in China. The same problem is with the acquisition of additional majors related to Russian studies. These data were proven in the process of our survey conducted in China in 2015 among the students of Beijing Language and Culture University, Zhejiang University of Foreign languages, Tianjing Foreign Studies University, and The University of Inner Mongolia learning Russian (Bitkeeva & Golik, 2015; Kaplunova, 2017). The survey included the questions on the level of Russian and a motivation for its acquisition. The results revealed similar tendency – most students admitted relatively low Russian proficiency level, those who studied English as a second foreign language pointed out a higher proficiency level of the latter, among the main reasons for choosing the major were the job prospects.

2.3. Russian within “One Belt One Road” initiative

In the context of the “One Belt One Road” initiative, the cooperation between the countries involved is increasing. The project includes over 100 states among which are the post-Soviet states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan) and a certain number of states geographically close to Russia, such

as Mongolia. As Russian used to play a great role as a language of international communication in these states during the Soviet period, this initiative gives a good chance for its revitalization as of a language of international communication.

2.4. New challenges in teaching Russian

At the same time Chinese researchers admit that the existing education model fails to meet the social demand for Russian speaking professionals both due to the lack of basic education in Russian and the lack of profound research in the sphere of teaching Russian as a foreign language to Chinese speakers (Lu, 2020, p. 48). The objectives of Russian talents' training in normal universities are "too general, the curriculum setting is out of touch with the training objectives, and the effectiveness of the internship practice is not paid enough attention to due to the lack of employment" (Liang, 2020, p. 142).

3. Research Questions

The corresponding question arising is whether Russian enjoying the status of a native language of the officially recognized Russian ethnic minority of the People's Republic of China can be successfully applied in the system of basic education of China to improve the level of Russian among the students applying for undergraduate programmes at universities.

Another question is whether the Belt and Road initiative can really influence the promotion of the Russian language in China with the following superiority over English in the Chinese education system in particular.

Finally, the concern is how the higher education system of China has adapted to this new period with the rising demand for Russian speaking talents.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to reveal the key factors affecting the promotion of the Russian language in the education system of China and to find possible ways of facing the challenges of the 21st century.

5. Research Methods

This article is based on the application of the research methods aimed at the analysis of the specific features of the Russian language functioning in the educational system of the People's Republic of China including the analysis of the academic literature, data based on the admission programmes and the curricula of the top universities of China providing Russian majors and the latest information concerning Belt and Road initiative, which is closely related to the spread of the Russian language in the modern era.

6. Findings

In fact, the favourable conditions for the promotion of Russian in China are provided by the Sino-Russian treaty basis with a certain number of corresponding provisions mentioned above. The promotion

of Russian in China included a series of events during “Year of Russia in China” (2006) and “Year of the Russian Language in China” (2009). The former facilitated the establishment of the above mentioned Russkiy Mir Foundation in 2007, the latter further increased the interest in learning the Russian language and culture and promoted the positive attitude towards Russia among the Chinese citizens.

The activity of Russkiy Mir Foundation established in 2007 is aimed at “promoting the Russian language, as Russia's national heritage and a significant aspect of Russian and world culture and supporting Russian language teaching programs abroad” (Russkiy Mir Foundation, 2019). The Foundation is a joint project of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science, which serves as the tool of the Russian foreign language policy. At present there are six Russian centers on the territory of the mainland China (at Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University, Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Jilin University, Shaanxi Normal University, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies) and one at National Chengchi University on the territory of Taiwan (Russkiy Mir Foundation, 2019).

According to the information provided by the Russian embassy in China in 2017 due to the increase in number of universities with Russian as a major (up to 159 colleges and universities) the total number of students learning Russian increased by 7% (amounting to over 26000 students) and the number of teachers of Russian increased by 10,5%. Besides, there are about 20000 students learning Russian as a second foreign language and the same number of secondary school learners (Ezhu huashiguan : eyu zai huapuji Chengdu buduan tigao: xuesheng renshu chao 6 wan ren, 2018).

Multisided Sino-Russian relations, especially in the economic sphere, increase the interest in learning Russian among the Chinese students. As a matter of fact, there is a steady demand in learning Russian in the border areas of China as a necessary requirement for business activity. For example, in Suifenhe border town Russian is taught in most secondary schools. The ability to learn Russian at high school is one of the priorities of the local government (Russkij stanovitsya yazykom mezhdunarodnogo sotrudnichestva v prigranichnyh rajonah Kitaya, 2014).

The most common type of education programme including Russian language acquisition at high school level in China is that of Russian language and literature. For example, School of Russian and Eurasian Studies of Shanghai International Studies University offers a complete teaching system with three levels of Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral degrees with 4 research directions for the Master's and doctoral programs: Russian linguistics, Russian literature, Russian-Chinese translation theory and practice, and Russian society and culture (School of Russian and Eurasian Studies, 2020).

Another traditional type of education pattern is the one based on the acquisition of two foreign languages including Russian and English (for example, this major is offered by the curricula of Shanghai International Studies University and Beijing Normal University (Zhong, 2016, p. 88). From 2000 onwards the articles on Russian study in China contain appeals not to limit education to the language acquisition, but to acquire interdisciplinary skills (Wang, 2000).

Last decade also witnessed the appearance of more complex education programmes including additional major acquisition as those of Russian plus Intellectual Property Rights, Russian plus World Politics, Russian plus Business Administration, etc. offered by Renmin University of China (Qian, 2008, p. 12). New methods of teaching Russian as a foreign language have been implemented in the curricula of

some universities of China. For example, Russian Language Department of Sichuan University started application of virtual reality technologies (including speech recognition units, automatic text voicing, etc.) in the Russian language classes (Qiu, 2020, p. 330). In fact, these transformations followed the publication of the main views on the reforms in foreign language teaching by the Commission on High School Foreign Language Teaching of the Ministry of Education of the PRC in 1998, which proclaimed, that “The basic skills of a single foreign language major can no longer adapt to the market economy” (Guanyu waiyu zhuanke mianxiang 21 shiji benke jiaoyu gaige de ruogan yijian, 1998). The new requirements promoted the development of Russian studies major in China alongside with the functional development of Russian in the sphere of Chinese education.

Another trigger to the promotion of Russian in China was represented by the Belt and Road Initiative, a global development strategy adopted in 2013 by the Chinese government involving over 150 states (including Russia) and international organizations. This initiative facilitates mutual acquisition of the Chinese and the national languages of the states involved. As proclaimed in 2015 by the author of the “Big Russian language” (大俄语) concept the then Vice Minister of the Ministry of Education of the PRC Liu Limin, “In the process of the Belt and Road Initiative realization the Russian language promotion is irreplaceable” (Liu, 2015, p. 3). This statement is based on the fact that two of three roads of the Belt cross the territory of the Russian Federation, which also promotes further functional development of Russian in China.

The international cooperation between Russia and China in the sphere of education provided 3+1, 2+1+1, 2+2, etc. educational modules, which allowed students to improve their language skills, broaden their horizon in the field of Russian studies. International cooperation between schools is becoming more abundant. The most remarkable outcome of the Sino-Russian cooperation in educational sphere was the establishment of Shenzhen MSU-BIT University by Shenzhen Municipal People's Government, Lomonosov Moscow State University and Beijing Institute of Technology in 2017.

Still, there is much to be done in the sphere of higher education. For example, Russian studies major was included in the list of programmes at doctorate degree education at Heilongjiang University for applicants of 2014 right after the proclamation of the Initiative (Guo & Luo, 2015, p. 21). Nevertheless, the list of the doctorate degree programmes for 2019 applicants included only that of Russian language and Literature. With the current training model of Russian experts divided into academic and applied one “the content is too messy and does not form a highly unified whole, Russian teaching in lower grades mainly offers basic Russian courses, including vocabulary, grammar, listening, dialogue and other courses” (Lu, 2020, p. 49). There are also appeals for the reformation of the traditional Russian language majors system in normal universities towards scientific talent training, so as to meet the Chinese market's demand of “go out policy” (Liang, 2020, p. 52).

7. Conclusion

The main challenges arising in the process of the functional development of Russian in the education system of the PRC are the following. Despite all the promotional campaign the lack of motivation among students (on the example of the students at Shenyang Normal University) to learn Russian is caused by the fact that most of them chose this major only due to low marks at entrance exam

which prevented them from studying at a desirable programme (Zhong, 2016, p. 89). Another point is a failure in learning complicated language as Russian from scratch, as this language is mostly not included in the Chinese system of secondary education, except from the border areas. The interest to Russian is mainly provided by the Sino-Russian bilateral cooperation, not by the eagerness of the Chinese government language policy to promote the languages of national minorities of China. Thus, even at the secondary school education level Russian is viewed as a foreign language the teaching of which (mainly in the border area) is determined by the economic factor.

In fact, the Belt and Road Initiative served as a trigger to the functional development of the Russian language in the system of Chinese education. Before the initiative teaching Russian mainly rested on such majors as of a teacher of Russian and translator / interpreter. The Initiative gave way to the educational programme on the regional and country studies. Moreover, with the overall number of countries involved in the realization of the initiative the promotion of the Russian language in the system of education of China can also provide strengthening of the status of Russian as a global language. The project realization should help to overcome the problem of Russian studies majors graduates' job prospects and consequently of practical application of language skills. At the same time there arises the challenge of adjustment of the curriculum of Russian language teaching to adapt to the growing market demands.

A broad legal framework between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China gave rise to the vitality and functional development of the Russian language in China. With the Belt and Road Initiative putting forward new requirements for the Russian language education the chances for sustainable development of Russian in China are even higher. Still, there is much to be done on the way of cultivating interdisciplinary talents acquiring Russian. Among the necessary points are: 1) the review of Russian language teaching methods; 2) a sustainable approach towards the Russian language teaching reform; 3) strengthening of international cooperation between the universities of Russia and China; 4) cooperation between the universities of China providing interdisciplinary education model.

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