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Deb Russell
University of Alberta

Xiao Xiaoyan
Xiamen University

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Interview with an Agent of Change: Dr. Xiaoyan Xiao

Debra Russell¹

University of Alberta, Canada

Xiaoyan Xiao

Xiamen University, China

Abstract

This interview was conducted with Dr. Xiaoyan Xiao, a professor from Xiamen University in China. She describes her path to becoming a spoken language interpreter and linguist and explains how she developed an interest in signed language research. She also explains how signed language interpreting is developing in China and how she is partnering with the national Deaf association to bring about change. Her experiences offer interpreters and educators a glimpse into some of the many exciting developments in China.

Keywords: interpreters and interpreter education; National Deaf associations; translation; interpreting on television; Chinese Sign Language (CSL); policy frameworks.

¹ Correspondence to: drussell@ualberta.ca

Interview with an Agent of Change: Dr. Xiaoyan Xiao

Dr. Xiaoyan Xiao is a professor from Xiamen University in China. Trained as a spoken language interpreter and a linguist, she has taught Chinese-English interpretation in Xiamen University for over 20 years. After spending a sabbatical year at UCLA during 2007, she began to investigate signed language interpreting in China. During 2012 to 2013, she spent another sabbatical year at Gallaudet University as a Fulbright Research Scholar. These experiences have shaped her work in China with signed language interpreters. Dr. Xiao and her colleagues have received research grants from Chinese National Social Sciences Foundation, the Chinese National Language Committee, the British Council and EU Asia-Link.

Deb: Thanks so much for taking time to talk with me while you are here at the World Federation of the Deaf conference in Paris, France. Can you tell us a little about your journey to become an interpreter educator and how is it that you became interested in signed language?

Xiaoyan: I have been an interpreter educator for the past 28 years, and I came to this entirely by chance. When I graduated with my BA, my Dean, Professor Yuru Lin – a pioneer in China in terms of interpreting studies – asked if I would like to stay at the University and become a teacher. She was looking for people to join the interpreting team, and she wanted someone very young. So in 1991 I joined the faculty as its youngest member. I have continued working with the same team ever since, and now that Professor Lin has retired, I am head of the team. I still remember that she used to introduce me as the youngest member and now I am among the oldest! I have been very lucky in that sense, being part of a close-knit group at Xiamen University for so many years, and from the beginning it has been with interpreting. Even though I was chosen by the Dean, I found that this is really the thing I wanted to do.

As for signed language interpreting, I have to go back to 2007, when I was a visiting scholar at UCLA in the Linguistics Department. Colleagues invited me to go to a lecture on ASL syntax, and they told me that the lecture would be interpreted simultaneously. That is my field, and I had never seen signed language interpreting in action. I had read about signed language interpreting in journals, but no one in the interpreting field in China talked about it at that time. So I went to the lecture which was given by a deaf professor. He is actually here at the World Federation of the Deaf Congress now: Dr. Patrick Boudreault.

Deb: Oh yes, Patrick is from Canada!

Xiaoyan: Yes, exactly. So he gave a talk, and I sat next to the interpreter who was speaking while he was signing, I had never seen interpreting done in that way, and I was just fascinated. So I went back to China and tried to find what had been done there. I found that there was no one doing any research about this. There were a few documents about what interpreters should or should not do, sort of the typical pre-historic warnings and interpreters writing about their personal experiences, but no real research about signed language interpreters. At that time, the leaders in the movement were not interpreters but rather people from Special Education. That started my journey of research: not training signed language interpreters, as our university is still mainly involved with Chinese-English spoken

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interpreting, but working with people from the signed language interpreting programs, with deaf people and with the Special Education community in China. It's been 11 years now.

Deb: So your PhD is in linguistics, and your master's is in...?

Xiaoyan: I have a PhD in linguistics - systemic functional grammar – and I have two master's – one from my university in conference interpreting and the other from the University of Westminster in Applied Language Studies. We had European funding which allowed me to go to the UK and sit in some courses with the European master's program at the University of Westminster during 1999-2000.

Deb: What a rich background to bring to training interpreters at your University! The university offers a BA and an MA in Chinese?

Xiaoyan: Yes, we have a BA and MA. We had one of the earliest masters in Chinese-English, and now we have the MTI (Masters in Translation and Interpreting) and the BTI. My university also offers the MTI and the MA for interpreting studies in Chinese-English and other languages such as Japanese.

Deb: So you came to signed language interpreting eleven years ago and now you are partnering with signed language interpreters and Deaf associations. Can you describe what you see as the context for signed language interpreting and training in China?

Xiaoyan: Things are just at the beginning of professional training. We now have five programs. Some of them are three years (like an AA degree), and some have just been upgraded to a four-year degree, but they are all under the umbrella of Special Education. When I give a presentation and list the programs, most people in China have never heard of these colleges, as they are not well known in China. Not like Xiamen University, which is one of the top rated universities and hard to get into because of the location, with sunshine, seafood, and the beach. Many parents want their children to attend university in a good city. So, I have contacts with all five programs and work closely with some of them. I visited two programmes, and sat in on some of the courses and then had a chance to talk with their trainers.

When I first started to approach this circle of deaf educators and deaf people, they were suspicious. "What is your interest? Do you have a deaf kid, a deaf spouse? No? Then why are you interested?" Yesterday I went to the IVT (International Visual Theatre) here in Paris with Dr. Junhui Yang, who now teaches in the UK, and she said, "I met you in 2009 when you came to a conference on deaf education (in Suzhou, China). You didn't sign at all." At that time, I had been trying to do an experiment and talk to people, but they wouldn't cooperate. And then she said, "And now, you sign so much better! I see you are committed, that you are still here with us." I guess she meant, "You are not here to publish one paper and then disappear." So the attitude is different now, and the Deaf community is much more embracing of me. Especially after my time as a visiting Fulbright scholar at Gallaudet University with Cynthia Roy between 2012-13. It was there I was able to see how they train interpreters at the PhD, MA, and BA level. So when I returned to China, I thought we should do the same. Our interpreters are trained by Special Educators who don't necessarily understand how interpreting works. For example, some trainers are very obsessed with the so-called "standard signing," which is word-for-word. I said to them, "What is the purpose of interpreting and translating? You want to communicate! If you are signing word-for-word and deaf people don't understand you, it is not good communication. It doesn't matter that it is signing in a "standard" manner; they don't understand you!" So, there is still a lot of that in our Chinese context.

Deb: I think when programs are housed in Special Education and are not taught by people with training in conference interpreting or interpreting and translation, then we are already on a different philosophical track, where people don't understand that this is an act of cognition that involves two languages.

Xiaoyan: Yes, indeed. Then in 2008 I was very lucky to receive my first major Chinese National Social Science Foundation Grant, which was a very huge step forward in starting my formal research into signed language. For the

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first few years, I did surveys of deaf users of signed language interpreters and of signed language interpreters: any of them that I could get hold of all over the country. In those days, you had to individually hand out printed surveys, asking anybody at any gathering of deaf people to fill them out and post them back to me. One of my findings was that deaf people complained bitterly about the quality of interpreting, principally because they couldn't understand the interpreters' signing. My survey of interpreters also asked about the biggest challenges they faced, and guess what? The biggest challenge was that they couldn't understand deaf people's signing! They think they have learned signed language, they sign "standard" Chinese signs, individual words, but when it comes to a real situation, they don't understand deaf people! I thought, "What a ridiculous situation, you don't understand each other, and yet you call it interpreting! How can this happen?"

But gradually, as I got to know deaf people, understand the educators and see what was happening on TV, well, that led me to spend a few years looking at television interpreting. In 2012, China passed an accessibility law that required all cities – even small, remote cities – to have a TV station that provides signed-language-interpretation for the news at least once a week. The most recent figure, which grows every year, is that we have 290 TV channels that have regular signing on TV. The Chinese Central Television (CCTV) news channel provides signed language interpreting everyday between 6:00 pm to 7:00 pm. This is prime time, so that really draws attention to signed language interpreting. I went to the studio in Beijing, where I was required to get special permission to observe the interpreters and interview them. The interpreters arrive one hour early to have their hair and make-up done, after which they have a stack of materials to read. The interpreting is very form-based, with them attempting to sign every word of the live newscast. After that visit, I did a comprehension study of deaf college students, having them view an interpreted broadcast and then answer some very simple questions about the content. After watching the interpretation, seen in a tiny box in the corner of the screen, the participants only got 23% of the questions correct. For example, the broadcast had a police officer talking about the crack-down on fake medication, saying that a particular cancer medication had sleeping pills in it. So I asked the students whether the medicine works. Some students answered, "Yes, it is good for sleeping." This is what they got from the interpretation! As for the political stories and international news, they understood nothing from the interpretation.

Deb: It would be interesting to test the comprehension rate of the interpreters and what they understood from the spoken Chinese.

Xiaoyan: Yes, and it would also be interesting to ask the interpreters to watch the interpretations themselves to see whether they understand the signing without the spoken Chinese.

Deb: What happened next for you?

Xiaoyan: I was at the studio and I talked with the manager, who told me they rotate a group of five people from the local Beijing deaf school. None of them had formal training in interpreting. I told them I was a trained simultaneous Chinese-English interpreter, and I could never sit there for 60 minutes of simultaneous interpreting, with no preparation. The news is very dense, it is read at a very rapid pace, and has very complex linguistic structure; it's just not possible. And there is just one interpreter as the producer refuses to swap interpreters after twenty minutes. He said it was troublesome enough to put a signed language interpreter on TV, and that it was just too much work for them.

So, they are providing interpreters on TV in compliance with the law, but nobody could understand the interpreters. That led me to think about how we could get around this problem, how we could get people to change. So I talked with the experts in special education trusted by the administration and gradually some of them started changing their attitude towards signed language. There is a heavy investment in the standardization of Chinese Sign Language, because deaf people from different parts of the country sign differently. There were also people involved in developing CSL syntax. So the good news is that more people are beginning to understand what signed language is, it's almost an informal recognition of the language, even though it is not in the law. The group recognizes that it is a language of its own, that it is not Chinese per se. So the recent release of the Lexicon of Common Expressions in Chinese National Sign Language, not calling it The Chinese Sign Language as it was in the earlier version, is great progress already.

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Deb: What role are deaf people playing in this linguistic work?

Xiaoyan: Deaf people are very much involved. The group headed by Prof. Gu in Beijing gathers deaf people every month from all over China, and they adopt one or two of the more common signs.

Deb: What are you working on now?

Xiaoyan: I am continuing to work with the coordinators of the five programs. I have reviewed their curriculum, and one of my MA students is now doing her thesis on curriculum design in signed language interpreting programs. (We have just finished a survey of 160 recent graduates from these programs.) We are also doing a review of Roy's interpreter education series and other key papers so we are hoping that that research can be shown to the signed language interpreting community. In China, the way is not to protest, but rather show how it could be. Also, at the CIT conference in 2012, I saw deaf interpreters for the first time. So when I returned to China, I introduced this form of relay interpreting at China's National conference on Interpreting Studies, which my team and I hosted in Xiamen in 2014, and people were very interested. And for the last National conference in Beijing in 2018, I asked for signed language interpreters to be used for my presentation, as I wanted to invite deaf people to attend, and the conference organizers were very accommodating, even paying the signed language interpreters appropriately! So changes are happening.

Deb: Well, it seems that you have all of the attributes of diplomat.

Xiaoyan: Sometimes I tell my deaf friends, "Don't be angry and fight, but show them. It is the way to get things done here. Try to make it look good on both sides, and everyone wins. One step at a time..."

Deb: So at your university do you teach any signed language?

Xiaoyan: Yes, I have been offering a course with deaf people for ten years now. It is called an Introduction to Chinese Sign Language Interpreting. The reason I have to call it interpreting is because I am in the English Department of the College of Foreign Languages. If I had offered the course under the title "Introduction to Chinese Sign Language," as I did when I first offered it, it would become a political debate about whether Chinese Sign Language can be considered a foreign language. I don't think we are ready to go there, at least not yet, in China. So in the course I invite deaf people – one, sometimes two – to co-teach with me. I do the design of the course, and they deliver the signing, and it has become very popular. Many students have said that they really enjoyed it and had no idea that "... *CSL could be so much fun, and that deaf people are so smart and humorous!*" And to that I say "Yes, they are just like us!" Students tell me that it is difficult to get into the class now, as it is so popular. It is open not just for my students but for students from business, law, chemistry, medicine, music, etc., so when registration opens, in just one day the courses are filled! I have started a level two now for the MA students. Right now my university doesn't have a deaf faculty member, so my co-instructors are my personal friends or from the local special education school. So I had to work with the headmaster to seek permission to have them come to teach, and we are able to pay them from my research grant. There is no position for a deaf instructor, not even a TA, unfortunately.

Deb: So what would happen if a deaf student wanted to come to your university and study with you?

Xiaoyan: I was talking with someone here who is an American deaf lawyer who wants to give scholarships for Chinese deaf students to study law in China, and that got me thinking about this question. First of all, they have to pass the national entrance exam, which will be very hard for deaf people from the special education schools, as our university only takes students who are among the top tier scholastically. I have been thinking about the possibility of finding a way for deaf people to work with me and become faculty, but there is no funding for interpreters. So I told the American deaf lawyer that if a student were admitted to my university to study law, they would need two interpreters and that the funding would have to include that. But where do you find qualified interpreters who understand law? That would be really hard. We are not at that stage yet.

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Deb: So what can you tell me about interpreter associations in China, given that we just held the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) conference here in Paris?

Xiaoyan: There is a Chinese Association for Translators and Interpreters that now has a sub-committee on Interpreters, of which I am an executive member. The Chinese National Association of the Deaf (CNAD) has recently set up Chinese Sign Language Interpreters' Committee. I was invited as the deputy director. The Committee is headed by a deaf person, and one of the major projects we are working on is interpreter certification: that is writing up the standards for certification for signed language interpreters.

Deb: What will that look like given the training of signed language interpreters is challenging at this time?

Xiaoyan: I have been trying to persuade my colleagues to look at testing in a new way. The previous system of certification of signed language interpreters tested candidates by having them translate words and sentences. However, deaf people would complain to me about the interpreters, saying things like "He has the advanced level (there are three levels, beginner, intermediate and advanced), and he doesn't understand my signing!" So I am trying to work with the people in the SLI committee, which includes deaf scholars, to change the testing, but they are not interpreters themselves. Some of them are educators or have a linguistics background, so I am trying to persuade them to look at how we test in spoken language interpreting, as it is the same thing. We need to test signed interpreters on real situations, not words or sentences. So we are having a lot of communication about these issues, which makes me happy. It's a good team, and while we don't always agree, I am finding that I can use my expertise from Chinese-English interpreting to show that it's the same process for Chinese and CSL. The new certification system is due at the end of the year, and there is a lot still to be done. I think we need more input from outside the country. So we will see. I will try this summer while I am in Beijing for the training of signed language interpreters to talk with the team about the work and the best way forward.

Deb: What will you be teaching this summer?

Xiaoyan: I will teach basic theories of interpreting and explore topics like: what is quality in interpreting? What does it mean to be comprehensible? Really basic T and I theory. The class I will give is a three-hour workshop, within a number of different workshops taught in two sessions. There will be a total of 160 students altogether. Each province recommended about four of their best interpreters who are respected in the Deaf community and who are currently working, so at least they have the language skills. It will be like a foundational course for people who have never had training. The CNAD is providing the training. It's a good start.

Deb: How many deaf people are in China? How many interpreters?

Xiaoyan: The official number of deaf people is 20.54 million, and for signed language interpreters, well, for my second survey in 2017 I had 140 people respond, and some of the deaf educators doubted that there could be that many in China! I covered 28 provinces and autonomous regions (out of 32), and in every city, there has to be at least one or two good interpreters, doing the work. I think many are retired teachers or have deaf family members. But like many countries, some of our CODAs have no training and are making decisions that wouldn't be what we expect from a professional. For example, one time a CODA talked about how she tried her very best to get her deaf client off during a court matter. The CODAs are acting as interpreters, but they are not recognized or trained as such. So we are at the beginning.

Deb: It sounds like you are a great ally, and we need about 400 more of you in China as there is so much to do!

Xiaoyan: I am trying to get more people, and for them to think alike. I am in a WeChat group of over 300 – in China everyone is on WeChat. These 300 people are deaf and hearing educators, linguists, and so on, so we can build a community and share information. Fudan University, for example, is a really good university which has a CSL linguistic center headed by Prof. Gong. They have built a corpus of Shanghai Sign Language. They have quite a few MA and PhD students' theses on Chinese sign linguistics. My students in Xiamen U have produced 15 MA

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theses on SLI since 2008. In this way the WeChat group is a way to keep us informed about signed language work in China.

Deb: What advice do you have for those who read this and say, “Hey, I will go to China and help them set up interpreter training!” Would that be good, or is it better to allow the community and culture to find its own ways and solutions. So if someone were interested in coming to China and meeting with interpreters and so on, what would you say?

Xiaoyan: Find Chinese partners and see what they need. Don’t just come and criticize and protest. It doesn’t work that way in China. Be nice, try to develop allies. I think the future is positive for us. I have seen many changes over the past eleven years, especially regarding funding; there are many more opportunities. When I first started offering signed language classes, I met resistance, and now my faculty colleagues are much more supportive and appreciative of my work. They can see SL interpreting on TV and are open to what that means.

Deb: For readers that would like to learn from your work, what would you point us towards?

Xiaoyan: Here are three that you might enjoy reading:

Xiao, X. (2018). Sign language interpreting on the Chinese mainland: Status-quo, problems and prospects. *Chinese Translator's Journal*. 2018 (6). Beijing. (In Chinese. with X.Gao & X. Zhao)

Xiao, X. (2015). Chinese Deaf viewers’ comprehension of signed language interpreting on television: An experimental study. *Interpreting: International Journal of Research and Practice in Interpreting*. 17 (1). (In English. with X. Chen & J. Palmer).

Xiao, X. (2013). Sign language interpreting on Chinese TV: A survey on user perspectives. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*. 21(1). (In English. with F. Li)

Deb: Thank you so much for taking time to speak with me and share this information about interpreting in a part of the world that is unfamiliar to many of us.

Xiaoyan: Thank you so much for your interest.