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# Professional Interpreter Training in Mainland China: Evolution and Current Trends

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## Abstract

Professional interpreter training in Mainland China has developed tremendously since it was first included in higher education programs. China's unprecedented economic development, coupled with its rising strength in international affairs, have increasingly helped professional interpreter training obtain its academic status. Such a process has not only been rapid, but it has also shown characteristics typical of the higher education context in China. In this article, the author reviews the history and evolution of professional interpreter training in China and analyzes current trends. The author also points out some challenges and problems facing the training of interpreters in academic programs.

Key Words: interpreter training, Mainland China, academic programs, evolution, trends

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# Professional Interpreter Training in Mainland China: Evolution and Current Trends

## 1. Introduction

Professional interpreter training in Mainland China emerged after China's adoption of the reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s, and it has been developing by leaps and bounds into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Chinese government's "going global" (*zou chu qu*) strategy strengthened the country's national competitiveness, which gave rise to the need for qualified translators and interpreters. The past few years have seen not only a wave of interest in professional interpreter training, but also its exponential growth across China. Against this backdrop, new trends, as well as challenges, have arisen regarding the status of interpreting as a discipline of study in Chinese higher education.

## 2. History and Evolution

Prior to 1978, no higher learning institution in Mainland China could claim to have a "professional" interpreter training program. Training in interpretation was seen as a part of foreign-language enhancement, and training in translation—at that time, mainly literary translation—was included in the 4-year program of a foreign language major (Zhan, 2010). Virtually no research was done to explore and account for the components of translation and interpretation in a complete syllabus of a foreign language program.

China's need for professional interpreters was still small then, given the country's limited participation in international affairs. It was natural that only a few excellent graduates from foreign language programs in the country's top-tier universities went on to pursue careers in interpretation, many for political purposes. Translation and interpretation, therefore, were seen as skills for which a good foreign language major should be qualified, without the need for additional (or professional) training (Zhong & Mu, 2008).

Considering that the first professional interpreter training school in the world was established in Mannheim, Germany, in the 1930s (Pöchhacker, 2004), China lagged behind in its professional interpreter training by nearly half a century. The first real effort was made after the People's Republic of China gained its legal position in the United Nations (U.N.) in 1971, when there was a sudden, surging need for translators and interpreters to work in the U.N.

In 1979, China established the first "U.N. Translator and Interpreter Training Class" (*yi xun ban*) at the then Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, as a joint program of the U.N. and the Chinese government; U.N. Language Services was directly involved in syllabus design, teaching, examination, and staff recruitment for graduates. This program, which ran for 12 consecutive sessions, was China's first initiative for professionalized interpreter

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training. Its success gave rise to China's first translation and interpretation (T&I) school, the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation of Beijing Foreign Studies University, founded in 1994.

Prior to the establishment of this first T&I school, several universities in China had been offering collaborative interpreter training programs with foreign partners. Such initiatives, however, were projects of the individual universities, and were not guided or assessed by national education authorities such as the Ministry of Education or the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council. Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, for example, started its interpreter training program under the English Language and Culture Program with the British Council in 1993. Other efforts were made predominantly by Xiamen University, which cooperated with Deakin University between 1990 and 1993 to set up an experimental class of interpreting, and later with Westminster University between 1994 and 1998 to conduct interpretation training and research. These pioneering interpreter training programs laid a foundation for the later boom of interpreting programs across the nation.

In the early stages of its evolution, professional interpreter training in China showed some distinctive features, the most prominent being the incorporation of T&I into the academic discipline. In comparing the Chinese system of T&I education with that of the West, Gile (2010) stated,

In virtually all countries in the “West,” institutionally speaking, Translation is not officially an academic discipline per se. There are “schools” for translation and interpreting or “programs” for translation and interpreting, but very few “departments” of translation and interpreting. (p. 11)

In China, however, professional interpreter training soon acquired academic status, with the first Department of Translation and Interpretation established in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in 1997. With increasing interest and enthusiasm in the young (sub-)discipline, scholars of T&I studies soon moved into this specific field from various other disciplines, such as English language, literature, and linguistics. Since that time, professional interpreter training in China has gradually shifted from what Gile (2010, p. 12) called the “academic pole” to the “professional pole.” According to Gile’s distinction, the academic pole “could be represented by translation and interpretation courses within foreign language departments,” whereas the professional pole is “traditionally represented by ‘schools,’” with a philosophy “perhaps best represented by [the International Association of Conference Interpreter’s] AIIC’s documents on the topic.” The establishment of the Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation at Shanghai International Studies University and the School of Interpreting and Translation Studies at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, following Beijing Foreign Studies University, and the fact that these three major schools are members of the *Conférence Internationale Permanente d’Instituts Universitaires de Traducteurs et Interprètes* (CIUTI), are the best examples of China’s development of the “professional pole” of interpreter training.

Needless to say, the transformation of professional interpreter training was achieved only as higher education institutions took an increasingly active role in the global community of education and research. Such a transformation involved developments in a number of areas in professional interpreter training, including creating T&I-specific degrees, standardizing the guidelines and methodologies of teaching, curriculum design, and connections with market demands.

### 3. Current Trends

#### 3.1. Degree Programs

Boundaries between translation and interpretation as a means of foreign language acquisition and as a communication service are inherently and naturally blurred; therefore, Delisle (1988) distinguished between “pedagogical translation” and “translation teaching” and argued for the need for translator competence development. In the West, where it is not uncommon for an individual to master two or more languages, employers of translators and interpreters generally have a better understanding of the importance of professional skill training and look for credentials such as degrees or diplomas from professional training programs. In China,

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on the contrary, acquiring a foreign language is itself a task so demanding that the necessity of additional training for practicing translation or interpretation is largely ignored; the idea that mere proficiency in the working languages is enough for one to translate or interpret is still widespread. The establishment of the degree programs Bachelor of Arts in Translation and Interpretation (BATI) in 2005 and Master of Translation and Interpretation (MTI) in 2007 were thus key steps in the development of professional interpreter training in China.

Universities set up BATI and MTI programs following the national catalog, issued by the Ministry of Education for undergraduate programs and the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council for postgraduate programs. Universities must file an application, be assessed on their teaching and research capabilities, and obtain approval from either of the two offices before they may offer degree programs, have their names listed in the updated annual national catalog, and start recruiting students.

Since its initial establishment, the BATI program has been approved for 106 universities and the MTI program for 159 universities across the nation (as of the end of 2013). T&I is currently one of the most popular disciplines of study in China (Chai, 2007), and universities are increasingly applying as well as seeking approval to institute these programs. The trend is indicative of China's aggressive shift toward the Western tradition of professionalized interpreter training; moreover, the institutionalization of the disciplinary status of T&I parallel to linguistics and foreign languages and literature helps to clarify the distinctions and avoid confusions between language training and T&I training. Given the fact that this disciplinary shift took hold and expanded across the nation in only 5 years, a concern is whether the universities and the T&I market can indeed accommodate the new demand.

### 3.2. Student Recruitment and Employment

The BATI and MTI program handbooks, issued by the National Steering Committees for BATI and MTI Education in 2012 and 2010, respectively, describe the curricula and syllabi for the two programs. Despite similar general guidelines, BATI and MTI programs across China vary greatly in terms of recruitment numbers, program pathways, and specific courses—once universities gain approval for setting up a specific T & I program, they may decide for themselves how their program will be run.

Enrollment in the BATI program varies across universities, ranging from 15 to 90 students; in the interpreting pathway of the MTI, enrollment ranges from 5 to 60 students. Because universities in China generally see T&I programs as a new sector of growth, both in terms of attractiveness to students and benefit from higher tuition fees, the common mentality is to recruit more students. However, the actual numbers reached are influenced by various factors, including the geographic location of the university, history and quality of the specific program, faculty strength, resources provided, and competition among universities in the same region.

Students are recruited into the BATI program from the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (*gao kao*), in which they are tested on general subjects such as Chinese, math, and English—but not on their aptitude for interpreting. For the MTI program, students are generally recruited from the National Postgraduate Matriculation Exam, combined with an interview. Thus, in most cases, the candidate pool cannot meet the needs of recruitment for professional interpreter training programs. It is problematic too, that after students in the interpreting pathway of the MTI program finish the 2-year program, there are no professional interpreting exams. Students are awarded an MTI degree upon obtaining the credits and going through an oral defense for their degree thesis or report, but do not (need to) prove the professional competence of practicing interpretation work, which very often they have not developed.

It is therefore not surprising that after they graduate from specific programs of professional interpreter training, a large proportion of students do not get employed as interpreters, but rather make a living on their foreign language(s). Since the graduation of the first few classes of BATI- and MTI-degree holders, the interpretation market has not experienced the significant changes that were anticipated when the programs were first established. Because employers have not shown a particular interest or confidence in graduates who hold professional degrees of interpreting, the gap between market demands for truly competent interpreters and professional interpreter production in higher education still exists, particularly in second- and third-tier cities.

### 3.3. *Teaching Guidelines and Methodologies*

The establishment of BATI and MTI programs took place amid extensive discussions on teaching guidelines and methodologies. Zhong and Mu (2008) compared teaching T&I as part of foreign language teaching and as professional training of translators and interpreters, and illustrated the fundamental differences between the two. Trainers in China have looked to the experience of professional T & I programs in the West and have come to the consensus that teaching T&I involves imparting to students the nature, objectives, process, principles, and methods of translation and interpretation through skill development, with lots of practice. Translator or interpreter competence can only be gained through systematic training, not through mere foreign language enhancement or sharing of knowledge. With these guidelines, professional schools in China have adopted the “four principles of professional interpreter training” (Zhong, 2007), namely, T & I skills as the main objective of training, practice-oriented teaching, basic theories to guide practice, and progressive competence development broken down in different phases.

In 2007, the School of Interpreting and Translation Studies at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies submitted its English Interpreting Course series for the Ministry of Education’s National Model Courses competition, and its program was awarded the title of the first national model course of interpreting. On the heels of receiving this award, trainers at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies summarized and promoted their curriculum design as the “GDUFS model of interpreter training.” In the GDUFS curriculum, interpretation courses are arranged into four different tracks, each focusing on the development of a part of interpreter competence:

1. Language track: Chinese–English/English–Chinese interpretation with a contrastive approach.
2. Skill track: consecutive interpreting, sight interpreting, simultaneous interpreting, interpretation observation and appreciation, mock conferences.
3. Theme track: theme-based interpreting, business interpreting, court interpreting, interpreting for media, interpreting for diplomacy.
4. Theory track: interpreting theories and practice, introduction to interpreting studies.

### 3.4. *Training the Trainers*

Interpretation pedagogy can be divided into broad themes of *selection*, *assessment*, *curriculum*, and *teaching*. Regarding teaching, the quality of professional interpreter training also hinges upon the quality of trainers. A clear drawback to China’s T&I training programs is that most of the traditional translator and interpreter trainers have their training and research backgrounds in other disciplines such as English, linguistics, and literature. With surging numbers of BATI and MTI programs across the nation, the system has come to realize the importance of having translator and interpreter trainers that are frontline practitioners of translation and interpretation themselves. In a large country with only 31 AIIC members (as of the end of 2013), all of whom are based in the three metropolises of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, the conference interpreting profession is somewhat underdeveloped and imbalanced. Because new interpreter trainers in universities of second- and third-tier cities have limited exposure to the interpreting profession, their teaching has mostly fallen short. It has therefore become urgent to hire and train more qualified teachers to meet the growing demands of professional interpreter training.

Chinese universities initially drew upon the rich experience of Western institutions and schools that had been successfully training interpreters for over half a century. Annually since 1997, the Translators’ Association of China (TAC) has been organizing T&I teaching summer workshops, in which experts from the Monterey Institute of International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University, and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies provide training for T&I instructors across the nation. The latest TAC workshop was held at Beijing International Studies University and drew around 60 trainees. In 2013, AIIC and

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TAC formally agreed to collaborate in training interpreter trainers; the first AIICT Training of Trainers (TOT) in Asia was held in July 2013 at Beijing International Studies University, with more than 30 trainees taking part.

National MTI TOTs were held six times between 2008 and 2013 at Shanghai Foreign Studies University, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and Beijing International Studies University to promote the ideas and methods of interpreter training for instructors of graduate programs. The National Steering Committee for MTI Education has required that every university with the MTI program send one instructor of interpreting, one instructor of translation, and one administrative staff member to workshops targeted to each. With the number of universities approved for MTI program growing over the years, attendance at the national MTI TOTs also increased. Trainers from the Interpretation Service of the U.N. and the European Commission brought international experience of professional interpreter training to these trainings. Another active organizer of TOT programs is Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, which hosted two MTI trainers training sessions in 2011 and 2012 for a total of 200 instructors.

As exchanges with foreign universities have increased, more teachers have been able to “go global” and participate in program observation or joint research at CIUTI-accredited schools. Instructors from major Chinese universities offering translation and interpretation programs at various levels are now receiving training in Paris, Geneva, Monterey, Leeds, London, and Bath, to name just a few Western locations.

### 4. Problems and Challenges

Professional interpreter training in Mainland China is growing on an increasing scale. However, the situation is not without problems and challenges. First among them is that the overwhelming majority of Chinese students enrolled in T&I programs are native speakers of Chinese and learned a foreign language only at school. Their L2 proficiency therefore quite often falls short of the requirements for a B language in professional interpreter training. Unlike in similar programs in more multilingual societies, language enhancement remains a key issue in China. The T&I programs need help to improve their language enhancement efforts, as well as aid in teaching interpretation to students whose L2 proficiency has not reached a sufficient level.

Instructors of professional interpreter training programs also could benefit from further training, because most of them, if not all, developed their foreign language(s) at school and are not in the best position to correct students' mistakes. The very limited number of native speakers of foreign languages in the pool of teachers makes high-quality training more difficult.

Most important, in a highly homogeneous country like China in which the population of native speakers of foreign languages is comparatively small, “the need for much translation into a foreign language is conspicuous and may require special attention,” as Gile (2010, p. 17) put it. Interpretation from L1 into L2 has not been heavily emphasized in Western professional schools, but it will be a major topic for interpreter trainers in China, and therefore demands a Chinese solution.

### 5. Conclusion

The training of professional interpreters in Mainland China, despite its relatively short history, has experienced rapid development, particularly in higher education. China's peaceful rising means that more of its voice needs to be heard in global affairs. Current trends in professional interpreter training will certainly continue well into the future. Given the challenges facing interpreter trainers in China, efforts should be made to improve the quality of such training with foreign language enhancement, syllabus development, training of trainers, and market standardization.

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