

## The interaction of foreign languages and society: a review of Russian language education in China<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article intends to contextualize Russian language education within the development of China-Russia relations, ranging over periods of friendly alliance, deteriorating confrontation, normalization, and strategic cooperative partnership. Moreover, by paralleling the situations of Russian language education with the corresponding periods mentioned above, the article tries to summarize and reflect on the relevant achievements and experiences, and to comprehensively sort out the development of Russian language education in China over the past seventy years. On this basis, it will further discuss how to adapt the Russian language education system to the call of the present time and the demand of the era, and how to further improve the quality of Russian students within higher education to better cater to the national development strategy, to promote cultural exchanges between the two countries, and to enhance China's cultural soft power.

**Keywords:** Russian language education; people-to-people and cultural exchanges between China and Russia; historical review; future task.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, through the joint efforts of the two countries, Sino-Russian relations have advanced to a comprehensive strategic partnership in the new era, exerting a profound impact on the people-to-people and cultural exchanges between China and Russia, especially on Russian language education in China. Ushering in another "spring" and even "golden age" after the Sino-Soviet friendly alliance period, Russian language education in China has now been provided with unprecedented development opportunities. Under these circumstances, especially with China's proposal to build a community of shared future for mankind and to implement "The Belt and Road" initiative in the new era, Russian language education is booming, providing strong support for the in-depth development of Sino-Russian cultural exchanges and cooperation. According to the author of this article, in the past decade, more than 60 Russian majors have been established in China, and 30 Russian research institutions have been approved by the regional and national research and training center of the Ministry of Education as well as the filing center. The form, scale, specification, and influence of China-Russia cultural exchanges have reached record levels, creating a model of civilized dialogue between major powers. For example, the national theme year event has become the flagship brand of cultural exchanges between China and Russia. Since the first national theme year event in 2006, China and Russia have successively held various events such as "National Year", "Language Year", "Tourism Year", "Friendly Youth Exchange Year", "Media Exchange Year", "Local Exchanges and Cooperation Year", etc. These events have continuously bolstered the mutual understanding and consolidated the friendship between the people of the two countries, and made important contributions to propelling the Sino-Russian relations to an advanced level. However, in terms of the achievements of the 70 years of higher foreign language education, we believe that Russian language education, as an important component of higher foreign language education, also faces many challenges. The international situation is changing rapidly, and China's reforms have reached the "deep water zone". To promote the building of a community of shared future for mankind, China and Russia need to strengthen mutual tolerance, learn from each other, and enhance intercommunication. Moreover, it is very important to consider how to set up a proper Russian language education system in response to the call of the present time and the demand of the era, and how to further improve the quality of Russian students within higher education.

Russian language education has a history of more than 300 years in China. The Qing government established the Russian Language Institution in 1708, which was the first school in Chinese history to train Russian professionals. Prior to this, the translation of Russian business was conducted by Russians. Since its establishment, the Russian Language Institution undertook the task of cultivating China's own Russian experts for 154 years until it was incorporated by the School of Combined Learning, established by the Qing government in 1862. Then in 1902, the Russian Language Institution was merged along with the School of Combined Learning into the Imperial University of Peking, the predecessor of Peking University. As the

cradle of early Russian language education and professional training center in China, the Russian Language Institution has trained a large number of Russian translators for modern China, accumulated valuable experience in school management, and gained a pivotal position in the history of Russian language education in China. Since the Revolution of 1911 in China, with the spread and the increasing influence of Marxism in the world after the founding of the Soviet Union, both the KMT and the Communist Party realized the importance of connecting with the Soviet Union and both devoted themselves to cultivating professionals with fluency in Russian and adequate knowledge about the Soviet Union. Russian language education has, therefore, continued to develop. According to incomplete statistics, before the founding of the People's Republic of China, there were 13 schools in China that had Russian language departments (Fu, 2004: 48).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Russian language education developed rapidly, and a large number of outstanding Russian professionals were cultivated, providing significant support for the country in terms of politics, economy, culture, education, and diplomacy. These Russian professionals gathered valuable experience for the development of foreign language education, which laid a solid foundation for foreign language education in China. On October 2, 1949, China established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union became the first country to recognize the founding of new China and the first to establish diplomatic relations. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, Sino-Soviet relations have gone through a tortuous process of alliance, confrontation, and normalization. The 70-year development of Russian language education in China is closely related to China's social and economic development. Russian language education in China has gone through ups and downs, which accurately parallels the changes in Sino-Soviet (China-Russia) relations. In this respect, no other foreign language education can compare with it. The development of Russian language learning as a subject after the founding of the People's Republic of China has also demonstrated a completely different path from other foreign language subjects because of these special historical reasons.

## **2. The 70-year history of Russian language education in the People's Republic of China**

Seeing that the 70 years of Russian language education in PRC is closely related to Sino-Russian relations as well as the national development of China, we will follow the vicissitude of diplomatic relations and refer to the various stages of Sino-Russia relations. We will look into the four major diplomatic periods of Sino-Russia relations: the friendly alliance (1949-1959), the deteriorating confrontation (1959-1981), the normalization (1981-1991), the strategic cooperative partnership (1991-now), to review and analyze the status and changes of Russian language education in the corresponding stages, and to comprehensively sort out the development of Russian language education in China in the past 70 years.

### **2.1. The first stage: Russian language education during the period of friendly alliance (1949-1959)**

In 1950, China and the Soviet Union signed the “Soviet-Chinese Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance”. 1949 to 1959 marked the friendly alliance period in the Sino-Soviet diplomatic history, also known as the golden period of Sino-Soviet relations. China’s national economy was able to recover and develop quickly thanks to the strong support of the Soviet Union. This period was also the most prosperous in the history of Russian language education, and it can even be said to be thriving. Russian language education of this period mainly focused on cultivating instrumental and application-oriented experts.

At the beginning of its history, new China suffered from poverty, and the country was in urgent need of construction. Therefore, there was a great demand for professionals in technology and management. At that time, the Chinese education level was backward and the talent pool was scarce. It was impossible to cultivate professionals to meet the urgent needs of national construction in a short time. Western countries, headed by the United States, implemented policies of containment and isolation against China and adopted blockade and strangulation measures in the diplomatic, economic, and cultural fields. Under these circumstances, turning to the Soviet Union for political support and for economic assistance, as well as learning from it in either minor or major aspects, became an inevitable choice for the construction of the newly-founded PRC. Mao Zedong pointed out in 1953 that great nation-building was needed at the time, but our experience was insufficient. Therefore, we must study the advanced experience of the Soviet Union (Hao & Li, 2001: 259).

To learn from the Soviet Union in an all-round manner, to acquire their cutting-edge knowledge, advanced technology, and management experience, it was first necessary to obtain ready-made knowledge, to introduce and translate a large number of books and materials in various fields, and to spread knowledge through books. Therefore, cultivating Russian translation professionals and putting in place different levels of Russian courses was important. Secondly, it was necessary to cultivate professionals. A large number of cadres, technicians, and students were sent to the Soviet Union to investigate, study, and engage in advanced learning. Studying locally, they applied mainly to the majors that were urgently needed for national construction at that time, involving various fields concerning the national economy and people’s livelihood. The communication work was, therefore, fully launched. In order to help all kinds of people studying in the Soviet Union to overcome language barriers and ensure their more effective study, Russian training before going abroad became a must. The third necessity was to introduce foreign aid and hire Soviet consultants and experts to come to China on a large scale to guide and support the construction of the new China in diverse fields. To learn and imitate the Soviet system comprehensively, experience, methods, and technology from the experts coming from the Soviet Union, the professionals who could speak Russian became an important bridge for effective learning and communication. The

new China emulated the Soviet Union system in national construction, in such aspects as industry, agriculture, military, national defense, medical care, energy, transportation, etc., as well as in the design and construction of the entire education system. In order to achieve practical results in a comprehensive study of the Soviet Union, politically-oriented instrumental Russian professional training and Russian major building became the top priority of Chinese foreign language education at that time.

The development of Russian language education in China and the comprehensive and effective study of the Soviet Union are complementary. Russian language education provided the necessary foundation for learning from the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union played an active role in the training of professionals and the development of science and technology in the construction of the new China. The upsurge of studying in the Soviet Union also put forward realistic requirements for Russian language education, building a broad platform for the popularization, development, and improvement of Russian language education, providing a strong driving force, and further promoting the development of Russian language education in China.

By 1952, a total of 36 colleges and universities across the country had established Russian departments, and there were 7 Russian junior colleges (Liu, 2017: 1). Russian language education also extended to primary and secondary schools, and China's foreign language education was completely inclined to Russian. The development of Russian language education at this stage was an impressive development under the advocacy of the country from top to bottom. The Russian professional teaching plan, syllabus, and textbooks were much enriched, and the Russian language education system was basically formed. The training of Russian professionals has achieved remarkable results, reaping numerous urgently needed Russian translation experts for the construction and development of China, especially for the smooth completion of the first and second "Five-Year Plan". According to statistics, by 1956, there were 1,960 Russian teachers in universities and more than 13,000 Russian major students.

It is particularly worth mentioning that Russian language education in this period actually went far beyond the scope of pure language education. It made important contributions to the training of applied professional and technical personnel from all walks of life who could speak Russian, and also played a role in the cultural construction of China.

## **2.2. The second stage: Russian language education during the deteriorating confrontation of Sino-Soviet relations (1959-1981)**

In 1958, the differences in domestic and foreign policies between China and the Soviet Union began to emerge. After 1959, cracks appeared between China and the Soviet Union, and Sino-Soviet relations soon deteriorated, gradually moving from alliance to confrontation, and even went so far as on the verge of nuclear war. In 1966, the Sino-Soviet parties broke off their relations, and it was not until 1979 that the first round of negotiations between the two coun-

tries was initiated. These specific circumstances were directly reflected in Russian language education in China.

In 1960, the Soviet Union unilaterally decided to call back all experts in China, and a large number of Soviet experts withdrew, bringing along a severe blow to China's economic construction. The demand for Russian professionals, therefore, dropped suddenly, resulting in a surplus of Russian professionals. China began to take moderate measures to suppress Russian language education, by mobilizing Russian major students to transfer to other language majors, encouraging Russian teachers to divert to other majors, and suspending enrollment of Russian major students in some colleges and universities. The 1964 "Seven-Year Plan for Foreign Language Education" proposed clearly to reduce the scale of Russian teaching. It pointed out that colleges and universities paid too much attention to Russian language education, while other language education was deficient. It also directed that in the next seven years, the proportion of students studying foreign language majors should be adjusted (Sun & Liu, 2009: 198). Although the scale of Russian language education decreased during this period, still, significant results were achieved in terms of teaching quality, textbook compilation, and teaching methods.

From the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s, the number of Russian major students in China shrank considerably. After the Zhen Bao Island Incident between China and the Soviet Union in 1969, a very small number of colleges and universities reopened the recruitment of Russian major students. After that, the Ministry of Education approved 26 colleges and universities to gradually resume the enrollment of Russian major students, but the number of students was relatively small. Some schools enrolled students every other year. The number of Russian major students in the country was only about 1,000 (Wang, 2010: 6).

By the restoration of National Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges, the enrollment of Russian major students was still very limited. In March 1979, the Ministry of Education issued the "Several Opinions on Strengthening Foreign Language Education", which clearly pointed out that Russian should maintain a necessary proportion in foreign language education. Researching the Soviet Union is a necessity for international struggles, as well as for studying foreign countries. Therefore, the training of Russian experts could not be interrupted. "According to the situation in these years, the training scale of Russian major in universities should be maintained at about 200-300 people per year" (Sun & Liu, 2009: 200). The requirement in the Opinions was later implemented, to a certain extent, to maintain the basic scale of Russian professional training.

### **2.3. The third stage: Russian language education during the normalization period of Sino-Soviet relations**

From 1981 to 1991, Sino-Soviet relations began to ease. The confrontation was put to an end, and the relations between the two countries gradually normalized. As a result, China's Rus-

sian language education was soon restored, and the training of economic construction-oriented compound Russian professionals was put on the agenda.

In the 1980s, China implemented Economic Reform and Opening Up, shifting its economic development model from a planned economy to a market economy. The effects of economic construction gradually manifested, and there was an urgent need for the support of a good international environment. In 1982, the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of China established independent and peaceful diplomacy. China no longer regarded opposition to a specific country as the goal of foreign policy and emphasized the development of friendly and cooperative relations with all countries based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. After Andropov came to power in 1982, he began to reform, seeking to get rid of the stagnant social and economic development and the disadvantaged situation of making enemies on all sides in the world (Li, 2019: 7). Since then, China and the Soviet Union initiated political consultations to normalize their relations. In 1989 and 1991, the leaders of the two countries exchanged visits, and the relations between China and the Soviet Union as well as the two parties finally normalized.

The establishment of the China Russian Language Teaching and Research Association was a major milestone in Russian language education in China. In January 1980, nine institutions including Beijing Foreign Studies University, Heilongjiang University, Peking University, Nankai University, Sichuan International Studies University, Beijing Normal University, East China Normal University, Shanghai International Studies University, and Xi'an University of Foreign Languages formed the preparatory group for the Chinese Russian Teaching Research Association. On May 3, 1981, the association was formally established in Shanghai, with a total of 1,300 members, 41 directors, and 11 standing directors. Later, the numbers of directors and standing directors grew to 48 and 15. This was the industry association for Russian majors in Chinese universities and colleges. Since then, those in Russian language education in colleges and universities have formed a joint force, and Russian teaching and research have embarked on a standardized road. The purpose of the Chinese Russian Teaching and Research Association was to contact and unite professional Russian teaching and research workers in colleges and universities across the country, to extensively carry out more academic research, to actively conduct academic exchanges of Russian at home and abroad, and to promote the prosperity and development of Chinese Russian teaching and research. In the same year, the journal *Teaching Russian in China* was launched, which is an international academic publication on Russian. It has become a high-quality platform for Russian educators to exchange teaching experience and publish research results. It played an important role in promoting Chinese Russian academics. In September 1985, the Chinese Russian Teaching and Research Association joined the World Russian Association and became a full member. Russian language education in China began to interact closely with Russian language education in countries around the world. By carrying out exchanges and cooperation between Chinese and foreign cultures, the overall internationalization of Russian language education in China was further promoted.

During this period, many universities reestablished Russian majors. By the mid-1980s, 29 colleges and universities across the country opened the Russian major (Fu, 2014: 120). At the same time, master and doctoral degree programs in Russian were successively founded at Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University, Peking University, and Heilongjiang University. It can be said that the most important achievement of this period was the formation of a multi-level Russian professional training system. The Russian major included four educational levels: junior college, undergraduate, master, and doctoral. Although the number of students receiving master and doctoral education was still very limited, the training system accumulated necessary experience for the training of high-level professionals in Russian language education in China and originated important professional training channels.

#### **2.4. The fourth stage: Russian language education during the period of Establishment and Development of Strategic Partnership between China and Russia (1991-present)**

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the independent Russian Federation fully inherited the Soviet Union's diplomatic heritage and the Sino-Soviet relations transitioned to Sino-Russian relations. Sino-Russian relations have developed from "friendly country relations" to a "constructive partnership" and then to a "strategic partnership". In the 21st century, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership has been continuously enhanced and improved, and the relationship between the two countries has entered the prime period in history (Li, 2019: 8). In 2001, China and Russia signed the "Sino-Russian Treaty of Good-Neighborhood, Friendship, and Cooperation", which secured the will and determination of China and Russia to be good neighbors, good partners, and good friends in the form of law. In 2011, China-Russia relations advanced to a "comprehensive strategic partnership". On June 6, 2019, the leaders of the two countries jointly announced that "China-Russia relations have entered a new era", the positioning of which was unique and of the highest importance in China's foreign partnership.

With the development of Sino-Russian relations, especially the development of economic and trade relations and the continuous expansion of exchanges and cooperation in various fields, it has become particularly urgent to cultivate a new type of Russian professionals who can cater to the needs of social and economic development and national strategies. Whether it is in terms of the subject system, professional training model, curriculum setting, teaching content, teaching effect, etc., or in terms of teaching level and teaching objectives, Russian language education in China must take more actions, and implement more systematic, and more profound changes. These advancements have brought Russian language education in China into a new period of development and prosperity, and professional training has shifted from single purpose-oriented to diversified application-oriented and compound.

In 1992, the Department of Higher Education of the State Education Commission decided to establish a National Advisory Committee on Foreign Languages Teaching to Majors in Higher Education to strengthen the research, consultation, and guidance of the undergraduate teaching of foreign languages in universities. The Advisory Committee set up an English group and a Russian group to put in place the reform of foreign language education, and to organize, standardize and supervise the undergraduate education of relevant foreign language majors in universities so that China's foreign language education can launch into a mature development track. As the official advisory agency for Russian majors in colleges and universities across the country, the Advisory Committee has formulated professional standards and issued professional syllabuses to promote the overall improvement of undergraduate Russian professional education and teaching level, professional training quality, and scientific research capabilities.

Various colleges and universities also actively participated, and their Russian language education started to exhibit their own characteristics, and professional training models and types have become more abundant and diverse. Based on the development features of the entire Russian language education, professional foreign language colleges focus on the language practice ability and the teaching skills training, while Russian majors in comprehensive universities attach more importance to the cultivation of inclusive humanities qualities. Due to differences in traditions and history, the training given to students in terms of comprehensive quality were also very different. Liberal arts, sciences, engineering, medicine, education, etc., all varied from one another. Moreover, the teaching emphasized theory learning as well as the cultivation of solid research ability.

Entering the 21st century, with the continuous enrichment of the connotation of the Sino-Russian strategic cooperative partnership, the people-to-people and cultural exchanges between China and Russia continue to deepen. As the first Chinese-foreign high-level cultural exchange mechanism established in China, the China-Russia cultural cooperation mechanism is a historical choice and strategic measure for China and Russia to build and deepen the (comprehensive) strategic cooperative partnership. This mechanism has played a very active role in enhancing mutual understanding between the two peoples, disseminating the excellent values and cultures of both sides, jointly building international cultural exchange brands, and consolidating the social and public support for the development of Sino-Russian relations (Ning & Li, 2018: 86). Russian language education in China has made a significant contribution to providing sufficient professional guarantee and research support. At the same time, the development of Sino-Russian cultural exchanges also puts forward higher requirements on Russian language education and Russian professional training in China, and constantly promotes the transformation of concepts, the enrichment of contents, and the deepening of reforms of Russian language education in China.

The Russian Language Subcommittee of the National Advisory Committee on Teaching Foreign Languages to Majors in Higher Education is currently working on the latest version of

*Teaching Guidelines for Undergraduate Russian Major*, in which specific requirements are made as to the objectives and specification of training, curriculum system, faculty and teaching conditions. Central to the guidelines is the aim to cultivate Russian majors with compound skills—solid foundation, strong knowledge and professional aptitude—capable of coping with the national needs generated by international exchanges, economic development at central or local level, foreign language education, and academic research.

In this period, Russian language education in China has been increasingly systematized, with academic majors standardized, modes of talent cultivation diversified, and teaching quality enhanced. It is also characterized by a functionally transverse expansion, with Russian language functioning as an important instrument for communication and research in many interdisciplinary fields. Within the framework of people-to-people exchange between China and Russia, Russian language serves as the bridge for cooperation across many areas.

### **3. Russian language education in the new China: achievements, experience, and reflections over the past 70 years**

#### **3.1. Achievements**

Along a winding yet upward path, Russian language education in China has proved fruitful over the past 70 years. Attainments, experience, and lessons learned are summarized in many scholarly writings (Liu, 2011, 2017; Wang, 2006; Yan, 1999; Wang, 2010; Wang & Xia, 2011; Sun & Liu, 2009). Based on the insights and proposals offered in these articles (regarding the efforts to build the system of Russian language education, issues and challenges facing the Russian major, as well as the development strategies to be employed for Russian language teaching), pieces can be put together to form a sketch of Russian language education in the new China. However, there are still two missing pieces to complete the picture.

##### **3.1.1. Achievements in talent cultivation**

Through the 70-year-long effort, Russian language education in China has yielded positive results in talent cultivation. From being politically oriented in the 50s, through economically oriented at the beginning of the reform and opening up, to culturally oriented in the 21st century, new modes of talent cultivation have shown their breaking out of traditional confinement. Innovative efforts—offering academic minors and dual degree programs, creating interdisciplinary majors such as the “foreign language +” and “major +”, or introducing the concept of “Big Russian” to cover more regions and countries—are put forward to facilitate the transformation of cultivation modes from the uni-disciplinary and scholastic to the compound and interdisciplinary, from “one major with many capacities” to the more accommodating “one expertise with many skills”.

So far, Chinese universities have completed the building of a large, multi-tiered system for Russian language education, hence the training base for cultivating Russian language talents. According to our statistics, Russian majors are offered at 168 universities in China. Undergraduate programs in Russian language, offered in 162 Chinese universities, have seen approximately 1,600 teachers (including professors, associate professors, lecturers, and teaching assistants) employed and 26,000 students enrolled. There are altogether 62 academic institutions that are authorized to grant a master's degree, and 16 to grant a doctoral degree in Russian language and literature. What's more, several universities enroll doctoral students of Russian language and literature through other programs such as foreign language literature, linguistics, and comparative literature. Our statistics show that there are now over 400 universities in China that offer public courses on Russian language while the number was only around 100 several years ago. Currently, students opting for elective courses on Russian language near 20,000, some of whom are basic level beginners while others have had some exposure in secondary school (Ning, 2018).

Meanwhile, an increasing number of secondary schools have started to add Russian language courses to their curriculum. Schools of this kind are mostly (50 in total) clustered in Heilongjiang province, with others scattering nationwide in Shandong, Henan, Hebei, and Xinjiang province. There are over 120 secondary schools in China that offer Russian language courses taken by over 23,000 students (ibid.). On a distribution graph, Russian language education in secondary schools may appear obviously regional and unbalanced, but, as an emerging force, it has increased the vigor and vitality of the discipline in China.

### **3.1.2. Achievements in facilitating national strategy implementation and people-to-people and cultural exchange between China and Russia**

The source of motivation that inspired the birth and growth of Russian language education is rooted in the desire to facilitate the implementation of national strategies—the mission and obligation Chinese educators have long committed themselves to. Throughout the 70-year development, Russian language education has seen two periods worthy of close attention. Its function, in the first decade after the founding of new China, can be summarized as “bring in”, “send out”, and “invite in”—to bring in from the Soviet Union the cutting-edge knowledge, advanced techniques, and proven experience; to send out students overseas to acquire expertise urgently needed; and to invite in tech-savvy Russian experts to facilitate a rapid recovery of national economy. In this period, Russian language education was responsible for the training of almost all foreign language learners. Rewarding experience was accumulated, albeit sometimes with painful costs. Over the past 40 years since the reform and opening up, particularly in the 21st century, China has begun to undertake more responsibilities for the international community. In this context, Chinese culture must “go out” before China does; Chinese culture must “enter” the world before China does. Once again, Russian language education in China has fulfilled this mission. Talents in Russian language, who were

nurtured to suit the national needs, have made substantive contributions to the deepening of people-to-people and cultural exchange between China and Russia. A case in point here is the jointly-launched translation program between the two countries, a program well-known throughout the literary and cultural world. With a plan to translate 100 canonical literary books by Chinese and Russian writers, mainly modern and contemporary, the program commenced in May 2013, and by August 2019 the translation of 94 books had already been completed, with 56 published by China and 38 by Russia. University teachers, with their language skills and books as a medium of communication, have formed the central pillars of the program. It is worth noting that the program has brought readers, translators, and publishers together, and through face-to-face interactions they have formulated a positive scheme of communication: reader-text-author-translator-publisher. It is a special case of people-to-people and cultural communication between two countries, and, so far, the most successful, fruitful, and influential translation program ever launched. It offers insights into the translation of canonical literature in a broader sense, whether from Chinese to Russian or vice versa, and it steers Sino-Russian communication toward a higher level (Ning & Li, 2018).

Russian-Soviet literature, with its profound influence, has held special significance for China's modernization. More than once it has determined the reading habits and intellectual life of Chinese readership. President Xi Jinping's book list, made public online, includes Russian-Soviet writers and works that he mentioned on many occasions, which he frankly said had profound influence over him. The book compiled by Liu Wenfei, professor at Capital Normal University, *Russian Literature Reader: Canonical Works that President Xi Jinping Knows Well*, is clear evidence that Russian-Soviet literature has played an irreplaceable role in the intellectual experience of modern and contemporary Chinese people (Ning, 2018).

As China becomes increasingly influential in the international community, people-to-people and cultural communication is playing an ever more important role. "Friendship between countries is based on the people-to-people bond", and the exchange between peoples and cultures proves to be highly efficient in forging such a bond. It allows for mutual understanding, respect, and learning between countries while reducing estrangement, and even hostility, to a minimum.

Among the "Top Ten Celebrities in China-Russia People-to-People and Cultural Exchange" announced in June 2019, six are teachers of Russian language at Chinese universities. While imparting knowledge and nurturing talents, they have made substantial contributions to Sino-Russian communication, to the dissemination of Chinese culture and academic thoughts, to the mutual understanding between two peoples, and to the promotion of values and cultures of the two countries.

### 3.2. Experience and reflections

On its way to opening-up, China owes much of its success in moving from the backstage of the world to the front to foreign language education in which Russian language education has

played an important part. As Sino-US relation becomes a sensitive issue currently, the mutual trust, learning, and communication between China and Russia have never been more important. In-depth cooperation between the two countries in a wider area is needed. The deepening of people-to-people and cultural exchange may solidify and improve bilateral relations, and contribute to the progress of international community multilaterally. Therefore, Russian language education in China should aim higher, look farther, and do better, in order to fulfill its due responsibility for national rejuvenation, China's development, and human progress. Toward this end, reflections should be made here so that lessons learned may function as a guide for the future.

### **3.2.1. Russian language education in China: a balanced development is needed**

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Russian language education has—under the influence of historical events—undertaken a path very different from that of other foreign languages—English in particular—since Russian and English educations have been in a “trade-off” relation. In the 1950s, foreign language education in the whole nation, at central or local levels, was completely oriented towards Russian, and nowadays the growth of the discipline barely satisfies the national needs, either in terms of speed or efficacy. Neither the former nor the latter can be considered as a desirable development.

Take Peking University as an example here. Before the 1980s, there were three departments of foreign languages at the university, namely: Western Languages (including German, French, Spanish, and English), Eastern Languages (ten languages including Japanese, Arabic, Korean, and Mongolian) and Russian—the only single language that had its own department, a heritage left by the dominance of Russian in 1950s-60s. Many foreign languages institutes and schools of foreign languages at Chinese universities may trace their long history back to departments of Russian language. For instance, Beijing Foreign Studies University, the PLA Language Institute, and Heilongjiang University are directly evolved from one precursor—the Russian Language Team at Yan'an Anti-Japanese Military and Political College.

However, along with China's reform and opening-up and the changes in world order, English education has risen up and taken the form of independent departments and schools, free from the framework of western language and literature. At many universities, English even becomes the only major offered under the name of foreign languages. Starting from kindergarten, or even from the antenatal period, English language education has occurred all the way through one's life. A nation-wide system of English learning has hence taken shape.

In contrast, Russian language education, even though there has been some progress, has generally been at a low ebb. Newly established programs are basically intended for “low-end talents”, centralized in border provinces and regions adjacent to Russia or involved in trade with Russia. Unlike the days of 1950s-60s, departments of Russian language now have seen their organizational structure retained, but scales substantially reduced, to the point of

being merged with other departments such as Eastern European, Euro-Asian, and mid-Asian languages, with only one teaching office remaining, or worse, the whole major canceled. The Department of Russian Language of Beijing Foreign Studies University has expanded into a school, but its scale is not by any means comparable to what it used to be. Heilongjiang University might be an exception in this case, with variants—schools or institutes—of Russian language department being created. However, this progress is recent, and largely attributed to the ever deepening communication between China and Russia over the past decade, to the geographical advantages the university enjoys, as well as to the needs of the local economy. Before that, it had long been inactive.

Although Russian language courses are offered at many secondary schools, the lack of teaching resources makes it difficult to form a coherent linkage with undergraduate education. On some occasions there will be an extra cost, which is why most universities decide not to enroll students who had learned their Russian at secondary school, but instead to educate them almost from the beginning level. Thus, the cycle of talent cultivation is prolonged, and the expressway is blocked.

It is obvious that the current conditions of Russian language education do not befit the status and development goal of China as a world power, and the unbalanced foreign language policies have exerted negative impact directly on Russian language education. A favorable environment has yet to be created. Considering the ratio between the population of Russian majors and the population of all students, and then the population of the whole nation, it is apparent that the number of people learning or knowing Russian remains very low. In addition, teaching quality needs to be enhanced too. Therefore, the status, obligation, and responsibilities of Russian language education should be clarified at the level of national strategy (Liu, 2017).

### **3.2.2. Russian language education in China: a well-thought-out plan is needed**

The planning in terms of foreign language education is, in essence, a form of human resource planning, implemented both in the language and the education dimension, designed to cope with the national needs for international exchanges and communication. Closely linked with macro educational policy, it aims to improve the foreign language competence of a nation and its people. Like language planning, which is essentially social, cultural, and political, the planning of foreign language education involves more than teaching and curriculum design. It is a form of language planning with obvious political and strategic intention, to be implemented in the area of education (Shen, 2019: 69). In this sense, the history of Russian language education stands as a reminder of China's oversight in its planning for foreign language education.

The early history of new China has seen an all-out effort to learn from the Soviet Union, which is a necessary choice for safeguarding social, political, and economic development, as well as national security. The “one-sided” policy tapped into the full instrumental potential of Russian language but overlooked the long-term planning for foreign language education, leaving

limited attention to English and other languages. Until the 1960s, with the deterioration in Sino-Soviet relations, Russian language education and talent cultivation hit a bottleneck, with more Russian language talents nurtured than actually needed. Meanwhile, translators working in languages other than Russian were urgently needed for diplomacy as China started to establish diplomatic relations with Western, Asian, African, and Latin-American countries. Under that context, the *Guidelines of the Seven-year Plan for Foreign Language Education* issued in 1964 declared rules that restrict the scale of Russian language education, which led to dramatic changes that plunged the discipline and talent cultivation into a rapidly worsening condition. Since the reform and opening-up, and the normalization of China-Russia relations, Russian language education in China has started to recover and improve. As the bilateral tie becomes stronger, it has undertaken increasingly important responsibilities.

In terms of foreign language education, the instrumental function of languages was over-emphasized in the past. The discipline of foreign language studies was simply equated with the training of translators. However, along with the progress of higher education, Chinese universities have seen profound changes in their function. The original purpose—talent cultivation—has expanded to include scientific research, social service, cultural inheritance and innovation, international exchange and cooperation. This means that every discipline has to undertake, more or less, corresponding responsibilities and foreign language education enjoyed unprecedented advantages in this regard. Accordingly, attention has gradually shifted to the planning of foreign language education, particularly after the Belt and Road Initiative was implemented. While national language policies started to attract wide attention, a consensus has also been achieved over the significance of less commonly taught languages.

Nevertheless, many languages, Russian in particular, have been faced with embarrassment. Russian is a minor language compared to English, but not as minor as and more valuable than less commonly taught languages. This has to some extent relegated Russian language education to a marginal status. If language policies in the past were politically oriented, then today's language policies are mainly economically oriented. Either way, Russian language education has not been able to achieve its intended results.

Therefore, great importance should be attached to the positioning of Russian language education within China's foreign language strategy. The official language of Russia, one of the six working languages of the United Nations, still has wide influence in CIS countries and eastern European regions. What's more, Russia is a country situated on both Europe and Asia, and, like China, it is a big power, a permanent member of the UN security council, and a member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Both China and Russia are attentive to and responsible for many global or regional issues such as peace, security, stability, and development (Liu, 2017: 6). Besides, both countries share a 4000-kilometer border. In this sense, China and Russia have every reason to be "good neighbors, good partners, and good friends" both for practical and strategic purposes.

With China and Russia ever deepening their cooperation in all areas, Russian language education also needs to keep abreast of the times. More urgently needed is an overall arrangement, a well-thought-out plan, and supportive measures, particularly in terms of language planning and resource allocation, so that Russian language education may fulfill a more positive and active role in facilitating the implementation of long-term national strategies.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

People-to-people and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and Russia have now moved to a higher level. With this in mind, the discipline of Russian language at Chinese universities should, apart from maintaining its strength in talents cultivation and scientific research, consider the following issues: how to cope with the changes of the times as well as national needs; how to establish or restructure the focus of the discipline; how to focus their research on subjects or modes of cultivation that suits China's development and long-term interest; and how to create new opportunities for Russian language education. In the future, research talents with a knowledge of Russian language will expect much more from Russian language education, particularly when they work in such fields as humanities, social or natural sciences, and engineering. If our Russian language departments can respond to such changes with disciplinary restructuring, with efforts to reform our cultivation modes, we will certainly see Russian language education in full bloom all across China.

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