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Chinese and Japanese language learning and foreign language education in Japan and China: Some international perspectives

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1 Introduction

This special issue has a double focus: Japanese and Chinese language teaching and learning around the globe, and language education in Japanese and Chinese contexts. Accordingly, in this introduction we aim first to provide readers with an overview of the growth of Chinese and Japanese as a foreign language, and secondly to explore issues related to the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Japan and China. While the teaching and learning of Japanese and Chinese are more recent study options in many higher education contexts, they are emerging as important modern languages for global citizens. This is especially true of Europe, which in many ways lags behind America and Australia in the teaching and learning of these languages, but is quickly catching up. Just as globalisation is driving the study of East Asian foreign languages, it is also resulting in an increase in importance of language learning in East Asian contexts, particularly with the learning of English as an international language. This special issue aims therefore to explore some of the dimensions of the impact of Japan and China's global rise on language learning in higher education around the world.

2 The teaching and learning of Japanese and Chinese as foreign languages

2.1 A historical overview

The teaching of Chinese and Japanese is a relatively new phenomenon in Europe compared to the traditional practice of teaching our neighbouring European languages. Japanese language education first began to boom around the world in the 1980s and early 1990s due to the growing economic strength of Japan and an increase in tourism from Japan around the world (Bramley and Hanamura 1998; Komiya-Samimy and Tabuse 1992). During this time, the globe saw an influx of trade with Japan and an increase in mobility of the Japanese population in terms of international business, study and tourism. The growth of Japan on the global stage brought about a rise in the number of people learning the Japanese language. Japan was

viewed as a monolingual, monoethnic and monocultural society, and thus in order to aid communication with the newly mobile Japanese population in tourism and in trade, Japanese language programs sprang up in educational institutions around the world, creating the need for new language courses in higher education. Japanese language education was strong in Australia and the United States due to strong Pacific trade ties, but it did not see the same impact in Europe. In Australia, for example, Japanese quickly rose to prominence due to government initiatives like those by Education Queensland, which elevated Japanese as a major language study option in Queensland public schools in the 1980s. Chinese and Korean were pushed by governments in the 1990s because of these same economic interests.

The economic stagnation of the Japanese economy caused a shift to newer modern languages, and in recent years we are seeing the same phenomenon with China. In 2011, China surpassed Japan to become the world's second largest economy, meaning China and Japan are the second and third largest economies after the USA, and thus generate enormous economic interest to Europe. In other terms, Japan and China are the largest non-European-language-speaking nations of global economic importance. Moreover, the recent global financial crisis, which put major English-hub economies, such as the USA and Europe, into deep recession, has likely hastened the shift towards Asia as the new world economic centre (Pennycook 2010). As China becomes increasingly relevant in all major industries, we are also witnessing an increase in the mobility of the Chinese population in terms of work, study and tourism. To fully meet the demand of this increase in mobility, Chinese and Japanese language programs have begun to make inroads into education systems in the EU and the rest of the world. The British Council (2013) reports an emerging need for Chinese language education, suggesting that Mandarin Chinese might grow further from its current place as the fourth most studied foreign language in the UK. The Confederation of British Industry (2013) has said that Chinese is one of the most sought-after languages by British businesses, with 28 percent of business surveyed rating Mandarin Chinese as a useful language to their organisation. While exact figures of those learning Chinese languages in Europe are hard to estimate, recent moves such as Russia declaring 2011 as the "Year of Chinese Language", show an increasing interest in learning the language. In other nations such as the US, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages reports that the number of US students learning Mandarin Chinese has tripled in recent years (Robelan 2011). It is therefore appropriate to expect numbers to also be increasing throughout Europe.

However, despite the political shift in focus from Japan to China, it is important to note that Japanese language education has continued to boom around the world for different

reasons. With the economic rise to prominence of Japan in the 1980s came an increase in cultural interest in Japan. The younger generation around the world, who had grown up knowing Japan as a world economic power, were also exposed to cultural aspects of Japan. This exposure in turn sparked interest in travel to Japan and interest in learning the Japanese language and culture. More recently, the world is witnessing an explosion of interest in *anime* and *manga* around the world, further fuelling the younger generation's desire to learn the Japanese language and go to Japan to study and experience Japan first-hand. Evidence of the continued boom in Japanese language learning can be found by examination of the number of students taking the Japanese language proficiency test each year, which is an international standard test of Japanese ability. The number of examinees in 1993 was 80,000, compared to 270,000 in 2003 and 560,000 in 2008 (Japan Foundation 2009). In conjunction with this increase in the number of students studying Japanese language, there has been an increase in the number of students travelling to Japan to study. The Japanese Ministry of Education reported the number of foreign students studying within Japan in 2003 numbered 109,000, compared with just 50,000 in 1993, and 10,000 in 1983 (MEXT 2004). In 2005, this number increased again to 121,812 (Guruz 2008). Furthermore, a recent initiative by Japan's Ministry of Education plans to increase the number of foreign students in Japanese universities to 300,000 by the year 2020.

Demand for learning Chinese as a foreign language has similarly skyrocketed in recent years, with overseas students taking the Chinese proficiency test rising from 10,000 in 2000 to almost 40,000 in 2005. China also ranks 6th in the world in terms of the number of international students it attracts (Graddol 2006). Asian languages are also making headway into global media, as evidenced by global market share of internet-based content. Chinese, for example, doubled its online presence from 2000 to 2005. Chinese universities are a fast growing market for European university partner exchange agreements, and there are increasing opportunities for European students to go to China to study.

2.2 Linguistic research into the teaching and learning of Chinese and Japanese

Despite this surge in Japanese and Chinese language education, there have been a number of studies that have highlighted students' difficulties in learning these languages, which are linked to high attrition rates in Japanese and Chinese language programs (Kato 2002). In early studies, for example, found university students of Japanese were progressing more slowly in language development than students of other languages in terms of overall proficiency. A study by Walton (1993) reported that it took native English-speaking students of Japanese

three times as long to acquire the same level of proficiency as in more commonly taught languages such as French, German or Spanish. More recently, Everson (2011) used a study of language training required for State Department employees (Jackson and Malone 2010) to suggest languages such as Japanese and Chinese take at least four times as long to acquire than European languages.

Everson (2011: 251) notes that even though the Japanese and Chinese differ both culturally and linguistically from languages such as English, the character-based writing system “presents special challenges for learners whose first language (L1) employs the Roman alphabet”, thus suggesting the writing system to be the main barrier to development in these languages. Although both Japanese and Chinese share elements of a common logographic script, the usage and historical significance of the writing systems are distinctly different and thus important to note. In China, Chinese characters are known as *hanzi*, which are a logographic script that connect a character to a meaning. Although *hanzi* are a meaning-based writing-system, approximately 80% of these characters contain phonetic radicals which give an indication of how the character is read (Cook and Bassetti 2005: 6). In Japanese the logographic script is referred to as *kanji*, and comprises just one component of the Japanese writing system. Because *kanji* originated from Chinese characters but did not fit the Japanese language, each *kanji* often has multiple *readings*, or ways to pronounce a single character depending on its context and use. There are more than 10,000 *kanji* in use in modern day Japanese literature, but knowledge of only the 2,000 most frequently occurring of these is considered necessary to become functionally literate in the Japanese language (Chikamatsu 2005). In Chinese the number of *hanzi* needed for literacy can be said to be 3,800 characters which make up over 99 per cent of *hanzi* in everyday texts. It is widely documented that foreign language learners struggle to master logographic scripts, particularly if their first language’s script is alphabetic (Toyoda 1998, 2000; Toyoda and Kubota 2001). It has been suggested that students of these languages need assistance to overcome the barrier to literacy that *kanji* and *hanzi* create for learners (Rose 2003, 2013).

With the increase in students learning Chinese, the EU will also see the same high attrition rates in Chinese and Japanese language courses as witnessed in Australia (Kato 2002) due to the difficulty of learning a character-based script, and a spoken language that differs widely from European languages, which share a similar grammatical and lexical base. The added dimension of Chinese as a tonal language adds a further challenge for students of a non-tonal language background. By conducting research into the learning and teaching of these languages, we can better develop pedagogical tools and strategies to support our

students and ease the burden associated with learning a difficult language. Previous studies have also shown students have difficulty regulating the learning of languages like Japanese, which can take more of an emotional toll on the learner than other “easier” languages (Rose and Harbon 2013). Other studies help shed light on the cognitive, psychological, and social aspects involved when learning these languages. For many students, the learning of Chinese or Japanese is a lifelong endeavor of which full proficiency may never be achieved. Research into ways we can help support our students in the teaching and learning of Japanese and Chinese are essential.

3 Language learning in East Asian contexts

Just as Japanese and Chinese foreign language learning has boomed throughout the world, so too has language education within Japan and China. The following section provides an overview of this growth to situate the articles in this special issue in their historical and contemporary context.

3.1 Foreign language education in Japan

The learning of European languages in Japan dates back to 1608 and the beginning of trade with the Netherlands, when an elite group of Japanese scholars began to study the Dutch language, albeit with minimal contact. In 1853, Japan was opened to international trade after pushes from American groups, and English became the predominant foreign language of study. In 1868, the modernisation of Japan through the Meiji restoration saw many English-speaking foreigners travel to Japan to work, and the learning of the English language increased in popularity in private language schools. After World War II, English language influence intensified with the American occupation, and the implementation of American-centred economic policies. As Japan’s economy developed, the Japanese education system was influenced by *kokusaika* or *internationalisation* policies. Educational policies attached to these reforms aimed to bolster English communication skills, and English language education became a priority in high school and university education.

English is now the only foreign language taught in most Japanese schools. An English examination also forms part of all university entrance exams. Even after entry into university, students undertake a minimum of one year of English language instruction, regardless of their major. In 2011, English also became compulsory in primary education. In Japan, “foreign language schools represent a 670 billion yen industry” (Seargeant 2009:95), and the English language teaching market is the largest in the world.

3.1 Foreign language education in China

While in Japan there is a clear historical trend that places emphasis on foreign language learning and internationalization, China in contrast has shown more volatile policies. While English was introduced as early as 1637, when the first British traders arrived, a later ban put on communication with foreigners ceased this contact. After the Anglo-Chinese War of 1839–42, English was used again, and in 1862 the Treaty of Tianjin saw the English language spread further into China. English language education increased further in the latter half of 19th century, and English was introduced into the national curriculum for middle schools in 1902.

The role of English was diminished with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, due to fears of westernization. At this time many university English departments were closed. However, when Chinese and Russian ties deteriorated, English was made the official first foreign language in schools from 1964. English then took a hit from the Cultural Revolution (1976), which saw foreign language departments close once again. In the aftermath of the cultural revolution, English grew in popularity again, leading to an increased demand for English proficiency, which continued through the 1980s with China's more globally-oriented economic and political policy. With the economic development of China, the nation saw an increasing number of university students wanting to study English, which resulted in the spread of the language in higher education.

English is now compulsory in primary schools from age 9 (grade 3), although many schools start earlier than this. It is also a mandatory study option in Chinese colleges and universities. China has also seen an increase in content-based instruction in English and international programmes that offer courses entirely in English. In the past year, the spread of English education in China has been criticised on the ground that it detracts from Chinese language learning, and Chinese nationalism. As a result, there has been a decreased emphasis placed on the learning of English in favour of national studies.

In both Japan and China, there are also shifts in the learning of other foreign languages, as Asia takes a more neighbour-centred economic and political view. In Japan, more and more young people are reportedly opting to study Chinese and Korean as the second foreign language, instead of the historically important French or German (Kobayashi 2013). Moreover, statistics compiled by Japan's Ministry of Education show that Chinese citizens make up 65.5% of all foreign students in Japan – many of these Chinese students have travelled to Japan for the purposes of obtaining a Japanese education. Similarly, China is

second only to the USA in terms of popularity of international study abroad for Japanese citizens.

4 The scope of the special issue

Our overview has shown that through globalization and international trade, East Asia remains an important focus for the teaching and learning of foreign languages in higher education. This is in terms of the learning of East Asian languages in non-historical contexts, and the learning of foreign languages within East Asian contexts. Thus, this special issue aims to contribute to the growing body of research in both of these important realms. Furthermore, in the journal's position as a European-based publication, the special issue aims to draw together international practices and draw relevance to movements in Europe to forge stronger ties with our East Asian trading partners.

In the past, Europe has lagged behind Australia and the US in the study of East Asian languages. This is because with the formation of the European Union and increased mobility between member nations, research in language education has very much centred on the learning of European languages by both EU and non-EU nationals. This special issue provides a multi-faceted contribution to the study of East Asian language education, which is an area that will continue to grow in importance as the Europe begins to look more outwardly to its role in the global economy.

This special issue opens with an article by George X. Zhang that provides a comprehensive overview of the growth of Chinese language education in Europe and elsewhere in the world. The article argues that, as universities respond more readily to market forces and shifts in student demands, higher education institutions will need to recognise the importance of growing Asian economies and language centres will need to be in a position to expand their Asian language options. While Zhang acknowledges that many universities now offer courses in Asian languages such as Chinese, these programmes are still in their infancy when compared to the teaching and learning of more traditional European languages. He calls for a more collaborative and coordinated approach to manage and shape changes in language learning and teaching, which are rapidly occurring as a new Asian-focused era of globalization is emerging. The article provides a useful overview of the importance of Asian language learning today, and thus helps to frame the remaining articles in this special issue, which have a focus on either Japan or China.

4.1 A focus on Japan

The next four articles focus on Japan, two dealing with the learning of Japanese and two with foreign language education in Japan. The first of the Japan-focused articles is by Sachie Banks who reports on a collaborative drama project conducted in a beginner-level Japanese language university class. The project aimed to develop the grammatical knowledge of the language through the writing, examining and editing of scripts. The drama aspect of the project also aimed to encourage students to develop attitude and emotion into their spoken Japanese. The article shows that the three-week project facilitated development in the students' Japanese language skills, a heightened awareness of their use of the language, and critical analysis of linguistic choices. The seven students in the study also expressed a raised confidence when using the language with native Japanese speakers. The article has clear implications for not only the teaching of Japanese as a foreign language, but also the integration of drama into language classrooms in general.

The second Japan-focused article is by Jim McKinley, who examines the impact of Western criticisms of Japanese rhetorical approaches on learners of Japanese who are learning to write in the language. This article aims to apply what we know about Japanese learners writing in academic English to the opposite context of English speakers writing in academic Japanese. The author points out that this is an under-researched area. Western researchers have often taken a one-way examination of Japanese writers conforming to Western rhetorical approaches and have paid little attention to how Western writers learn to write in Japanese. The article also argues that much of the Western criticism of Japanese rhetorical approaches is not applicable to academic writing in Japanese, which the author shows adheres to the same rhetorical structures of academic English writing. The article also examines the issues surrounding reader and writer responsibility, and writer identity and voice when writing in the two contexts, drawing on real-life experiences of writers of Japanese as a second language.

The third article examines the effectiveness of picture books for Italian instruction at Japanese universities. This article is written by a team of researchers (Minoru Yomo, Kazuhito Uni, Danièle Moore and Takashi Kiyose), who explore the use of such books as authentic materials for adult learners, deployed in class as a basis for close textual study and discussion. Their investigation of the relevance and utility of children's literature suggested that Japanese students were very receptive to such an approach, particularly as it provided them with a context for preposition use, past tenses and the conditional and subjunctive moods as well as for intercultural study. This example of drawing adult learners into the target language through children's literature may well be relevant for similar English

language classrooms in Japan, and indeed mirrors the interest outside Japan in *anime* and *manga*.

The last Japan-focused article, by Emmaline L. Lear, is concerned with using reflective journals to improve English language skills via reflective journals. The author reports on a study of the effectiveness of the use of guided journals to improve intelligibility, especially in students' prosody. Implemented over one semester, with an experimental group and a control group, university students were asked to engage in a series of reflective tasks focussing on the intelligibility of phonemes that are difficult for Japanese students. The study suggests that the tasks stimulated students' awareness of their errors in pronunciation, and the experimental group demonstrated improvements in word stress, intonation, and pausing.

4.2 A focus on China

In the second half of the special issue, we present a series of articles which focus on China. The first is by Hui Ling Xu and Robyn Moloney, who explore Chinese language learning by heritage learners in an Australian university. The article is an important investigation of language revitalisation among the large English-speaking Chinese diaspora living in Australia, for whom their heritage language is learned language as a foreign language in classrooms. The study reveals the complex motivational systems of heritage language learners, including heritage/cultural identity drivers and employment/economic incentives. The study grew out of pedagogical concerns that arose from under-achievement and high drop-out rates by heritage language learners in university courses. The pedagogical implications of the study are directly connected to the teaching of heritage language learners in Australia, but the findings will also be of interest to teachers of Chinese around the world, who are increasingly finding heritage language learners in their classrooms.

Following this is an article by Chuanning Huang, who outlines a needs analysis for Chinese language teaching. It presents the results of a year-long investigation among Chinese language students in the USA in terms of their perceived needs, and compares students' preferred learning activities with instructors' practices and perceptions. It is noteworthy that most students did not place any particular importance on improving their Chinese cultural knowledge, but instead wished to focus on their conversation skills in class, which suggests a future avenue for needs analysis research. In terms of classroom practices, the study found considerable divergence between the preferred learning activities of students and the activities their instructors were using. The article explores some of the constraints regarding curriculum delivery that inevitably arise.

The next China-focused article is by Haiwei Zhang, who reviews the importance of stroke order in the learning of written Chinese (*hanzi*). This article ties in with the issues outlined above regarding the challenges posed by the Chinese writing system for the foreign language learner. The author provides a review of some existing studies on stroke order of Chinese characters and discusses implications for handwriting instruction in Chinese as a second or foreign language — implications that are also relevant for those involved in teaching *kanji* in Japan and *hanja* in Korea.

This article is complemented by a contribution from Qi Zhang and Zhouxiang Lu, also on the learning of Chinese characters. Zhang and Lu examine the impact of a task requiring students to write Chinese characters on social media sites on the learning and use of Chinese characters in other contexts. The authors had hypothesised that increased productive use of typewritten Chinese would have a positive effect on their ability to handwrite Chinese characters. The quasi-experiment showed that because students were able to enter characters by the phonological pinyin system, which required them to recognize but not produce the characters, their overall productive skills in handwritten Chinese were not affected by the task. The authors also discovered that some students relied on machine translation to complete the task, but were not at the required proficiency to identify mistakes in the translations or post-edit the generated texts. The article has clear implications for the integration of social media tasks in foreign language classrooms, and for the use of machine translation in completing written assignments.

Continuing the theme of social media in language learning, the article by Ya Ping (Amy) Hsiao and Peter Broeder explores the medium of Twitter as a tool for students to use their Chinese language skills. The authors examine the features and outputs of self-directed interactive learning through the social interactions afforded by the micro-blogging and social media platform Twitter. The study found that the learners created an interactive learning environment, and that their Twitter behaviour and motivation for using Twitter to practise Chinese correlated significantly with their learning performance. The most striking aspect of this article is the learner feedback on how such an intervention could be structured in the future.

The special issue concludes with a contribution from Weiming Liu and Ann Devitt on reciprocal peer co-teaching to develop learner autonomy in a beginners' Chinese class in Ireland. The action research they describe, within a postgraduate teacher education programme, provides an interesting insight into how reversing the role of teacher and learner can enhance the language learning process, and sheds light on how peer-teaching fostered

solidarity and cooperation despite the stresses experienced by learners in trying to maintain the high standard of presentations. Their findings, on students' consolidation of the specific aspects of the course that they were responsible for teaching, form an important contribution to our understanding of learner involvement and learner responsibility.

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