The cultural context of training: the case of the interpreter in China and Australia

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China and Australia differ markedly in cultural and social context, the demands placed on interpreters, and the training provided to interpreters to prepare them for professional duties. This paper aims to explore China and Australia's translation and interpreting (T&I) training programs to elaborate on the "goodness of fit" of training and demonstrates how both the pragmatic and cultural context of interpreting (in both nations) explains anomalies in their training approaches.

KEYWORDS

Australia, China, curriculum, interpreter training, interpreting assessment schemes

1. Introduction

Because interpreters are frequently required to navigate languages in a range of fields/ disciplines, technical/disciplinary mastery is impossible; instead, the role of the interpreter is often reduced to that of a "mere" conduit of information, where they are only required to exhibit mastery of the two languages being bridged. Llewellyn-Jones and Lee's (2014) influential examination of the role of the community interpreter suggests that interpreters should step out of this space by embracing a more active professional role. However, the corollary of such a shift is that interpreters will be forced to specialize and develop context-specific expertise beyond language skills. It also suggests that the sociocultural context in which interpreters operate is likely to exert a subtle influence peripherally on their practice as professionals. The role of the national context in shaping training and development practices has been examined in a range of professions and suggests that context is powerful in determining employee development systems (Tregaskis, 1997; Shaked et al., 2021; Marx and Muurlink, 2022). Thus, this paper examines the effect of national context on training in a single occupation across two highly contrasting milieus and asks: how does context influence training? Additionally, it examines the issue of whether training in these two contrasting settings is "fit for purpose."

The two cases this paper explores—China and Australia—differ markedly in both demographic, cultural, economic, and political variables. The 2021 Australian Census showed that 27.6% of residents were born outside Australia, while almost half the population has a parent born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2022). This diversity does not translate to broad mastery of languages; however, considering only one in five Australians are bilingual (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017). As a predominantly English-speaking and relatively small nation (at least from a population perspective) placed in the Asian Pacific region, Australia is thus relatively linguistically homogenous and isolated. Not surprisingly, there is a continuing substantial demand for interpreting services (Wallin and Ahlström, 2006; Splevins et al., 2010). In Australia, the Translation and Interpreting Service (TIS) alone has nearly 3,000 registered interpreters (Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), 2015), and these numbers do not represent the industry in its entirety. Australia is a highly multicultural setting, as evidenced by 300 languages actively spoken within its borders (Australian Bureau of Statistics

(ABS), 2017). However, it is forced to rely upon a relatively small cohort of interpreters to bridge the cultural and language divide in the delivery of services including social welfare, legal, medical care, diplomatic, and trade services.

By contrast, the 2020 census in China indicates that less than 0.1% of the total mainland population comprises overseas residents (Migration Policy Institute (MPI), 2022). Nevertheless, strong linguistic diversity still exists. For instance, unique languages are spoken by 55 ethnic minorities (Cai, 2020), with the Han being the major ethnic group, a single group that alone captures 1,500 dialects (French, 2005). However, Mandarin is the standard national language of mainland China. Aside from that, China has the world's second-largest GDP, with its exports dominated by manufactured goods headed for countries where residents do not speak Mandarin (OEC, 2020). In China, *translation* is big business: there are 40,000 professional translators and 500,000 translation-related practitioners working casually, spread across 3,000 professional translation companies. By contrast, simultaneous *interpreters* are rare, with just 500 practitioners known to operate in China (博雅翻译 (Boya Translation), 2016). With a unifying national language and only a tiny minority of immigrants who do not speak Mandarin, the nation's professional international language skills are focused on the operation of international relations, business, and government affairs (Ko, 2020).

This study draws on content analysis derived from the results of publicly available curricular documents, and in the case of the Chinese training context, the relatively limited publicly available documents are supplemented with national curricular directives. In the case of Australia, these documents were further augmented with detailed course summary documents, learning outcomes, and assessment items. In addition, the two nations' public-facing documents on interpreting accreditation bodies were examined in detail. In a word, the sample in Australia is exhaustive: all Australian accredited interpreter training programs were examined; in the Chinese case, due to the characteristics of the corpus, the sample proved less comprehensive.

2. Interpreting training in China

Two main interpreting assessment schemes in China both issue credentials: namely, the China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI) and the Shanghai Interpretation Accreditation body. CATTI is a national T&I ability certification test (全国翻译专业资格考试综合服务平台 (CATTI Integrated Service Platform), 2019, 2021). Its test format has remained unchanged since its inception in 2003 (Ko, 2020). CATTI does not specify specific guidelines for interpreter assessment but lists two subjects under the consecutive and simultaneous interpreting assessment category: interpreting practice (evaluating interpreting skills) and interpreting comprehensive aptitude (evaluating interpreting ability in a professional context) (全国翻译专业资格考试综合服务平台 (CATTI Integrated Service Platform), 2021). The Shanghai Interpretation Accreditation, on the other hand, is market-oriented and highlights what it terms a "Comprehensive Application Ability" evaluation in the examination, which involves the assessment of the competencies closely related to interpreting (上海外语口译证书考试网 (Shanghai Foreign Language Interpreting Certificate Examination Platform), 2009). While "comprehensive" suggests that the curriculum needs to be designed to

cope with a broad array of interpreting settings, this is in fact not the case. In reality, the Shanghai interpreting test, administrated by Shanghai International Studies University, only focusses on two domains: business and political interpreting. The Shanghai test, launched in 1995, and administered twice-yearly, tends to be dominant in the Pearl River Delta region.

According to the latest available statistics from 教育部高等学校翻译专业教学协作组 (China National Committee for BTI Education) (2017), the number of universities that provide translation and interpreting training totaled 381 in July 2017, with 252 institutions offering undergraduate majors and 215 institutions offering masters. The number of institutions with T&I undergraduate majors increased to 301 by March 2022 (教育部高等学校翻译专业教学协作组 (China National Committee for BTI Education), 2022), suggesting that the industry remains in a rapid growth phase. Regarding training in language diversity, 外语研究与语言服务协同创新中心 (Collaborative Innovation Center for Foreign Language Research and Language Services) (2018) listed sixty-eight languages on offer in China's foreign language training. Training is confined largely to the tertiary sector, with undergraduate and postgraduate degrees as the main qualifications offered in interpreting.

Despite the scale of interpreter training in China and the accessibility of the standardized interpreting curricular, the lack of visibility of the specific online curriculum content among 381 universities prevents conducting a comprehensive documentary analysis similar to one undertaken within Australia. Course structures are not exposed online. In a sense, this is unsurprising, given that all universities have to follow the curricular guidance imposed by the government. There is thus a large degree of commonality between all courses offered.

However, drawing on the recently edited volume *Key Issues in Translation Studies in China* (Lim and Li, 2020), it is possible to derive a sense of not just the scope of T&I teaching and curriculum but also T&I assessment schemes and a historical overview of T&I training development since the 1970s. In addition, the 外国语言文学类教学质量国家标准 (Quality Standards for Teaching Foreign Languages and Literature) has set rules for how foreign languages are taught; for example, the curricula system must include professional core courses, training programs, applied practices, and a graduation thesis (外语研究与语言服务协同创新中心 (Collaborative Innovation Center for Foreign Language Research and Language Services), 2018).

It is clear that the emphasis on tertiary training of T&I is grounded in foreign and Chinese language and classical literature appreciation (外语研究与语言服务协同创新中心 (Collaborative Innovation Center for Foreign Language Research and Language Services), 2018). Conversely, what is noticeably absent, is professional training in interpreting. Researchers like Dam (2010) stated the categorization of interpreting from a western democratic country perspective---interpreting may be classified, labeled, and divided into types and subtypes based on various criteria, with the working mode being one of the most significant. However, the categorization of interpreting types in China is vague, with scant consideration paid to general interpreting in various modes and contexts---only liaison interpreting, consecutive interpreting, and specialized-theme interpreting (predominantly business interpreting) are clearly recognized as categories. Similarly, Smirnov (1997) categorized specialized interpreting from a western outlook---specialized interpreting training courses are designed to train students in one of three areas of

specialization: police/court interpreting, medical interpreting, and business interpreting, which are tailored to address specific contexts. Chinese interpreter training focuses more on business and political interpreting, as police/court interpreting and medical interpreting focus is generally justified by a substantial immigrant population—absent in China. Thus, the focus of CATTI and Shanghai Interpretation Accreditation is on Chinese interpreter training in economic and political domains.

While T&I is internationally regarded as embedded in cross-cultural communication and an emphasis on mere linguistic proficiency alone is widely considered insufficient (Sun, 2020), the Chinese approach appears to be more detached. Existing professional T&I training (Sun, 2020) and even interpreting research in China pay scant attention to both the social and cultural perspectives (仲伟合, 2016). Furthermore, CATTI does not address cultural considerations.

The corpus of Chinese T&I research can be divided into five broad fields: (i) curricula design, (ii) teaching methodology, (iii) textbook compilation, (iv) T&I testing, and (v) T&I training. The quantity and quality of empirical research are limited in T&I studies (Tao et al., 2020). Additionally, no specific code of ethics has been developed for translators and interpreters, and CATTI does not include this component in its tests (冯建忠, 2007; Song and Fang, 2018). With the growing number of interpreters in China working freelance, the lack of a relevant code of ethics may trigger workplace misbehavior (Ko, 2020) but also indicates that training of interpreters in China is regarded as having little to do with highly contested or controversial settings, considering it has more to do with business settings.

Finally, writing, considered a key technical skill requiring mastery, is central to interpreter training in China (Sun, 2020). However, the systematic teaching of *academic* writing (including appropriate referencing and the issue of plagiarism) is absent from the Chinese interpreting curricula.

3. Interpreter training in Australia

Despite Australia's liberal market economy, the nation's translation and interpreting industry is quite closely regulated and structured (Saks, 2012). There is a single national standards and accreditation authority, the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), which provides credibility to agencies that employ certified practitioners (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), 2022a) as well as sole operators. Since 2018, minimum training requirements in Australia have been mandatory for potential interpreters who applied for the NAATI test. National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) (2016, p.08) identifies eight "core" categories for interpreting competencies: language competency, intercultural competency, research competency, technological competency, thematic competency, transfer competency, service provision competency, and ethical competency. Diverse language training is provided to meet the demands of the LOTE (Language Other Than English) population in Australia, with about 106 languages available by NAATI for certified interpreter tests modes. By contrast, China's formal offering is limited to 68 languages. In addition, NAATI's online directory shows that the certified practitioners cover over 230 languages (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), 2022b).

Despite greater language choice in training compared to China, Australia's tertiary interpreter education sector is much more compact and transparent. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of public-facing curricular documents is achievable. Twelve out of the thirty-three degree-granting Australian universities offer short, diploma, undergraduate, or postgraduate qualifications in interpreting. Of these 12, 8 offer interpreting training programs, and four offer several interpreting courses (single and non-integrated units). Interpreting programs are usually full degrees between 1.5 and 2 years (full-time); interpreting courses are generally non-accredited and much shorter in duration, with most being offered on a single-semester basis.

Considering Australian interpreters need to tackle interpreting challenges in more contexts than their Chinese counterparts, interpreting training is broader, including conference interpreting, simultaneous interpreting, medical interpreting, and legal interpreting. Historically, Australia has welcomed (and continues to welcome) a high number of immigrants to its shores, and it is inevitable for interpreters to encounter challenges from a cultural context. Accordingly, NAATI incorporates social and cultural elements in its T&I competency. Subsequently, cultural elements, along with interpreting services, are addressed by relevant organizations and institutions for cultural and language gap-bridging communication.

For Australian institutions that provide interpreting education, research design and methods are integrated within each program, and the majority require research proposals as an output of research. For instance, in one typical course *Research Methods in Linguistics* (at the University of New South Wales), the curriculum covers "research ethics, transcription, corpus methods, interviews, focus groups, linguistic ethnography, discourse analysis, multimodality, and case study research." Also, the student is expected to independently develop a research proposal (UNSW Sydney, 2022, para.1).

More than half of Australian interpreting institutions include ethical practice in professional translation and interpreting. For example, Monash University links ethics in a practical manner to the AUSIT Code of Ethics:

> The online PD [professional development] workshop examines the ethical complexities of the interpreter's work in relation to the AUSIT Code of Ethics, as well as the ASLIA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. The workshop analyses ethical concepts, their practical application to interpreting work, and best practice for interpreters in ethically challenging scenarios (Monash University, 2022, para.1).

Furthermore, half of the Australian Institutions specify the need to complete academic writing associated with reviewing the literature. For example, in *Writing for International Students* offered by The University of Queensland, "a range of skills necessary to participate in academic life, including academic English, digital literacy, critical thinking, and citation and referencing" are taught (The University of Queensland, 2021, para.1).

While the approach taken in Australia is relatively comprehensive, Australian based interpreters commonly face challenges that their counterparts in China would rarely confront. As highlighted earlier, high levels of immigration to Australia are ongoing and includes a substantial influx of refugees from war zones or minority groups, giving rise to a substantial body of new citizens with language challenges compounded by mental illness (Blackmore et al., 2020).

Thus, interpreters in Australia are regularly exposed to traumatic experiences in contested settings such as domestic violence. Surprisingly, there is no accepted standard of practice or protocol within the industry for professional peer support and consultation organizations for interpreters exposed to traumatic events (Anderson, 2011). A substantial body of scholarly work targets interpreters' mental health issues, especially those working in medical settings. Still, no competency related to well-being or coping strategies is listed in NATTI's test scheme. In addition, Australian tertiary providers (with our analysis suggesting just a single exception) appear to have neglected the need to include well-being competency training in their suite of curriculum offerings for interpreters.

4. Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have compared Chinese-Australian interpreting needs and curriculum, highlighting some sharp differences between the two national contexts. The training focus of both nations does mirror, to some degree, national needs, although China's curriculum offers a greater focus on classical literature appreciation (at odds with the "practical" business and politics agenda driving translating and interpreting in China) and less on cultural context, while Australia's curriculum has a more diverse focus reflecting its relatively more (linguistically and contextually) diverse needs. What Australian interpreter training lacks however is curriculum that addresses the stressors placed on interpreters in handling the greater complexity of the Australian context.

The different emphases placed on interpreting assessment schemes also reflect the contrasting labor market needs in both countries: NAATI focuses on applied community interpreting practice, while CATTI and Shanghai interpretation accreditation tend to apply more focus on supporting the operation of trade and diplomacy. Turning to the nationally-accredited approach to training, the Australian interpreting courses are tightly aligned with the NAATI examination regime and regulation of the industry—despite a free-market economy being the overarching context. By contrast, interpreter training programs in Chinese are not underpinned by the need to pass examinations. However, curriculum is centrally controlled by the government in China, and unlike Australia, tertiary institutions do not have substantial leeway in determining course structures.

In a centrally planned economy, China's T&I tertiary education can thus be more easily steered towards trade and diplomacy; the interpreting exams offered by CATTI and Shanghai interpreting appear predicated on China's economic and political imperatives. The dearth of community-driven demand for T&I services is mirrored, not surprisingly, in the delivery of training. The absence of large-scale international emigration to China is reflected in the relative lack of languages on offer to students. In accordance with NAATI requirements, interpreting within Australia reflects a strong focus on meeting community needs. Australian training institutions offer far more language options, although from far fewer training institutions than China.

The ability to bridge languages is one of the challenges that citizens of nations active in the current global society have in common. But language is more than just the currency of communication. Wood

(2013) argues that *prestige* tends to be regarded as subordinate to "material and strategic goals" of nations, when in fact, prestige operates as a backdrop to national priorities, with prestige connected to power which has material, social, or what he calls "imagination" benefits for a nation (p.387). Australia and China are both countries that are seeking to establish new global footings, with Australia having a surprisingly functional and practical driver to its pursuit of linguistic agility. Australia's sudden shift to teaching Asian languages in the 1970s had a thoroughly practical trade-focused agenda (Milner, 1999) that would appear to parallel China's current approach. Japanese studies (with Japan at the time representing Australia's largest trading partner) and Chinese studies (with Australia resuming diplomatic relations with China in 1972) were strategic and deliberate decisions with transparent motivation. China's interest in ancient Greek and Roman studies, by contrast, is at odds with the practical focus on trade and politics evident in its translation and interpreter training. It is particularly curious as classical studies were marginalized in the late Ch'ing and early republican periods (Zhitian, 1997) and went through a period of being seen as a Trojan horse for "the restoration of capitalism" (Cheng, 1969). Now it is viewed as an effort to place ancient Chinese culture (plausibly) amongst the elite of ancient classical cultures (Che, 2022). This project appears to be part of a broader move to shift Chinese universities into a space where they have deeper "civilizational roots" (Che, 2022, para.10).

In this context, the focus on the study of literature in T&I training in China is less puzzling. A standardized training approach that focuses primarily on business and political interpreting (as opposed to language training) makes sense, given its purposive nature, and the literary component of T&I training may, in fact, uphold this purposive, coordinated approach. Nevertheless, it appears that China needs to take further steps to align its training with its national agenda. In particular, there is little to justify the underdeveloped nature of its T&I training in several critical areas, including research training, interpreting ethics, and academic writing.

The Australian case makes a curious contrast. Despite its relatively (and perhaps surprisingly) utilitarian interpreting curricula design, Australia's lack of subtlety in its training approach appears somewhat counterintuitive, particularly considering the complexity of tasks that interpreters undertake. In Australia, most interpreters are subjected to contested settings, such as law, immigration, and medical settings, which are more likely to be emotionally challenging and complex. However, most Australian tertiary institutions offer degrees in training and interpretation, with a clear focus on the acquisition of technical linguist knowledge or "hard" skills, with relatively little emphasis on "soft" skills, let alone acquiring the context-specific knowledge required to handle diverse assignments. The absence of training in soft skills and coping leads, understandably, to stress, and interpreters' emotional stability is closely correlated with work performance (Bontempo and Napier, 2011).

With a command economy, it is perhaps most surprising that China falls short of achieving 'fit for purpose' in its interpreter training approach, with the sophistication of its training system seemingly lagging behind the national need due to the widespread use of a single language---English as an international communication medium (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). Thus, despite a high level of engagement in global society, both nations still have some distance to go before their T&I training matches the breadth of their national interests.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

NG collected the data that underlies the international analysis and prepared the initial manuscript. OM lead the revision process, with the SD. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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