

# ‘Noisy guests shall not unseat the host’

QING SHAO AND XUESONG GAO

Framing high-stakes English examinations in mainland China’s state-controlled print media

## Introduction

There have been growing concerns in recent years about the status of English in China, the most populous country that boasts the largest number of English speakers and learners (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Wang, 2015). Such concerns are closely associated with the rising importance of the Chinese language worldwide, which seems to signal that ‘English is no longer so important’ (Wei & Feng, 2015: 59). The Chinese government has become much more active in promoting Chinese as an international language through the establishment of Confucius Institutes worldwide. The concerns about the status of English have also been related to the growing assertiveness of China’s nationalism. In September 2013, a former spokesman of the Ministry of Education appealed to the public to emancipate children from English and save the Chinese language (Zheng, 2014). In October 2013, the Beijing Municipal Commission of Education announced that the weighting of the English section in the Beijing version of *Gaokao*, the national university matriculation examination, would be reduced to 100 from 150, starting from 2016. In the meantime, the weighting of Chinese will be increased to 180 (Wei & Feng, 2015). In March 2016, the Beijing Education Examination Authority finalized the decision and set the weighting of Chinese and English in *Gaokao* to 150 in 2016 (Beijing Education Examination Authority, 2016). In addition to *Gaokao*, critics have openly challenged whether satisfactory College English Test (CET®) results should be used as a prerequisite for degree conferment in many Chinese universities (Xie, 2014).

Since these moves, widely seen as steps aimed at dampening the public fever for English, have stimulated heated debates in the mass media, it is important to examine how the media presents the two high-stakes examinations into stories with frames or its preferred ‘organising principles’ from which a media text derives its meaning (Reese, 2001: 11). These frames could help the mass media connect ‘a wide range of actors, from the state to individuals, over civil society and corporate actors’ in the process of language policy formation and implementation (Blommaert et al., 2009: 203; Also see Gao, 2015). By interpreting the media frames, we intend to show how the media has been used to mediate the public’s response to particular language policy initiatives (Tollefson, 2015).

## Framing high-stakes examinations in the Chinese media

The relevant news reports were selected by searching <http://news.baidu.com>, arguably the most popular online search engine in China. We searched for Chinese keyword combinations including ‘*高考英語*+*降分* (English: *Gaokao* + mark reduction)’ and ‘*四六級*+*掛鉤* (CET® +

linkage)'. Standing for the two bands of the CET®, '四六級' is widely used as an informal name of the examination in Chinese. The English equivalent of '掛鉤' is 'linkage', meaning the university-level policy that links students' CET® performance with the conferment of degrees. The searches helped generate 9,570 and 3,120 news reports, respectively. Given the scope of this inquiry, we decided to analyze the first 20 most relevant news reports on each examination as displayed by the search engine (<http://news.baidu.com>).

According to the Cyberspace Administration of China (2005), Type-A websites are stipulated as the only institutions that can publish original news reports online. All other websites (Type-B) are only permitted to reissue news reports from traditional print media and Type-A websites. In the selection process, we noted that the search results include news reports from state- and local government-owned media, major news agencies and their respective official websites. Therefore, we read through our search result items one by one and omitted any reissued, duplicate reports before we finalized the top 20 news reports for each of *Gaokao* and CET®.

Following the selection, we adopted an inductive approach to conduct a news framing analysis, in which frames, defined as a 'central theme' (Tollefson, 2015: 138) or 'organizing principles' (Reese, 2001: 11), are identified through multiple readings of media texts (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). To identify frame categories, we first read all the texts twice to get a general impression. With the help of NVivo 11.0, we then highlighted parts of 'essential narrative, moral evaluation, or preferred solution to a social problem' (Tollefson, 2015: 137) that denote the central themes in each text. Based on the categorization of all the highlighted parts, we identified the central themes, which were refined and generalized in the last round of reading. In the coming sections, these central themes or frames are illustrated with media extracts, which were originally in Chinese and were translated into English by the authors.

### ***Gaokao* in Beijing**

We identified three types of frames in the 20 reports on the incident of the English paper in *Gaokao*, including consensus frame (seven reports), disagreement frame (four reports) and local practice frame (nine reports).

At least seven reports use a consensus frame to present the English examination policy initiative in 2013 as a general agreement among the grassroots, despite the fact that the decision was made in a top-down manner by the Beijing Municipal Commission of Education. Relevant reports provide no details of the policymaking process and usually overlook opposing opinions. As in Extract (1), the new examination policy was portrayed to have been supported by the public, at least by the surveyed netizens:

#### **[Extract 1]**

In the discussion board of Shenzhen News Net, 84.32% of the netizens voted to support the reduction of marks. On the same website, in a discussion of whether English should be treated as a major subject in formal education, 87.56% of the participants said no. A majority of people expressed their opinion that students spend too much time on English... A netizen named 'commoner' thinks that our

society used to over-emphasize English not only in *Gaokao* but in many other high-stakes tests... 'Commoner' argues that it is high time we stopped enshrining English in high-stakes tests... (Yao & Lai, 2013: A15)

The journalist seems to use the consensus frame to build an impression that the de-emphasizing of English in *Gaokao* had gained support from the public. Statistical data (84.32%, 87.56%) are quoted in the report to suggest that the majority of netizens supported the initiative but the report gives no further information on survey participants such as their number and whereabouts. In a similar manner, other reports using the consensus frame attempted to impress readers that the new policy initiative had popular support by conducting their own surveys. For instance, a report mentions that '74.8% of the respondents support the policy to de-emphasize English in *Gaokao* while 15.5% do not' (Lan, 2013: B02). As reflected in Extract (1), the journalist also cites a particular netizen with the screen name 'Commoner' ('布衣百姓' in the original) to strengthen the impression that ordinary members of the society were supportive of the new policy.

It was also discovered in the analysis that four reports adopted a disagreement frame to highlight different opinions held by various stakeholders. As a counter-frame of 'consensus', these reports suggest that these stakeholders have no consensus among themselves with regard to the new policy initiative, as illustrated in Extract (2), in particular, its title:

**[Extract 2]**

Title: *Marginalising English in Gaokao: Pundits shout Hooray while students disagree*

In response..., pundits in education unanimously applaud the new policy. Students, however, have differing stances... Proponents and opponents expressed their opinions online and no consensus has been reached... A netizen... said with deep concern that the reduction of marks may lead to de-emphasising of English in schools because our formal education is extremely test-oriented... Then how could our children survive in the age of globalisation?... Some thought that English ought to be treated as an optional course in China... (Lin & Fan, 2013: B7)

It is noteworthy that this report focuses on responses of netizens who were allowed to express their concerns that the new policy initiative may undermine their participation in global activities. Unfortunately, the views of these netizens were often portrayed as incoherent, unorganized, conflicting or fragmentary while 'pundits' or 'experts' clearly sided with the official policy to constitute powerful consensual support for the new initiative. In other words, while these reports highlight a variety of opinions that different stakeholders may have against the new policy initiative, a lack of organization and agreement among them considerably weakens their stand against the consensus held by the majority who support the new initiative.

The reports that used the consensus and disagreement frames might have been intended to convey a message that the new policy initiative had popular support and that those who had reservations about it lacked coherence and consensus. It can be argued that

such coverage was meant to foreshadow any public discussion about the controversial nature of the relevant policy so that the authority of the policy and its makers could be maintained in the likely public debate. Nevertheless, the policymakers were clearly aware of the likely consequences and impact the new initiative has had on the public. At least nine reports adopt a local practice frame to inform readers of how the impact of the new policy has been felt by different sectors of the society. These reports also aimed to show whether the new initiative had dampened the public enthusiasm for learning English in mainland China. In the case Extract (3), the report assures readers that it had not undermined the popular enthusiasm for English, as evidenced by the flourishing business of English-language training in Beijing:

**[Extract 3]**

Journalists of *The Beijing News* visited 28 private training schools and found that English and math remained as the two most popular subjects in terms of the number of classes on offer and the number of teachers at work... A parent of a secondary-two student told us ...(he) would keep paying for the English training courses for his kid because (the grip on) English simply cannot be loosened. (Li, Yan & Xu, 2013: A06-07)

As it can be seen in Extract (3), residents continue to invest heavily in learning English. The new initiative has not led to the public perceiving that English will have an increasingly marginalized status in *Gaokao*.

The rest of the news reports, including those from local media in Jiangsu, Hainan and Hunan provinces (see Extract 4), used the same local practice frame to show that the public enthusiasm for learning English has not been affected by the changes in *Gaokao*.

**[Extract 4]**

Title: *Will Jiangsu follow Beijing to deemphasise English in Gaokao?*

In fact, prior to Beijing, the weight of English section in the Jiangsu version of *Gaokao* had been slightly reduced from 150 marks to 120 since 2008. However, the English fever has not witnessed any cooling effect because of the policy. 'We still have 5-6 English classes per week,' a high school English teacher told the journalist... (Jin & Huang, 2013)

Unlike the reports using the consensus and disagreement frames, news stories with the local practice frame focus on how the public responded to the policy initiative behaviourally rather than what views they had about it. Individual parents' active involvement in shadow education and the unchanged number of English classes in schools reflect the fact that English is still valued as an important school subject despite the reduction of its weight in *Gaokao*. These reports can also be regarded as responses to people's concerns over whether the new policy initiative will discourage individuals from learning English and thus undermine China's global engagement. Therefore, the co-existence of the consensus, disagreement and local practice frames in the news reports can be interpreted as the media's efforts to ensure that the new policy initiative goes unchallenged, though it is also

suggestive of the room permitted for discussing how the potentially negative consequences of the new initiative could be minimized.

### **CET® as a prerequisite for degree conferment**

There has been an apparent peak in the questioning and criticism of this prerequisite policy as our sampled reports include those in which the press reportedly associated tragic incidents such as suicide with CET®. Our analysis of the 20 reports helped reveal three popular frames in the reports, i.e., victim of the bad policy (6), legitimacy (10) and utility and economic consequences (4).

Typically, in suicide-related reports, the victim of the bad policy frame is often used to interpret the tragedy as a result of the policy under attack. Extract (5) was taken from a news report titled 'Female university student jumped from the kitchen window after CET® failure' and it illustrates how the test is connected to the death of the protagonist.

#### **[Extract 5]**

Asked by the police, the father speculated about the reason of his daughter's suicide. According to him, the girl became depressed after she failed in CET®... Her abnormal behaviour confused her parents because she had an outgoing personality before... (Wu & Fan, 2006)

Similarly, another suicide incident report was published with the heading 'Final-year student committed suicide after CET® failure' (Xu, Wang & Yao, 2006), which linked the tragic death of a final-year university student to the English test. It is worth mentioning that in both incidents, the motive for suicide was speculated. In fact, both reports explicitly mention that the journalists were still looking for the motive. However, in the titles of reports, CET® failure, rather than personality traits or psychological issues, is presented as the direct cause of the tragic end of the two students. In a follow-up report on student suicide (Extract 6), the journalist firmly established the CET® as the cause after further investigations:

#### **[Extract 6]**

Who is to blame? What was the reason behind this final-year student's suicide?... The Ministry of Education has never required any student to pass CET® in order to get the degree. In reality, what are universities in Sichuan actually doing? Our interviews revealed that most universities no longer demand their students to pass CET® for degree conferment... However, in the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, passing CET®-4 is a must to get a Bachelor's degree. (Xu, Wang & Sheng et al., 2006)

Through such rhetorical questions, the report makes salient the fact that the university where the student studied had made passing CET®-4 a prerequisite for awarding a degree. It invites readers to reflect on the highly problematic practice adopted by the university.

The reports on student suicide raise another issue with regard to universities' autonomy in respect to the prerequisite policy. Some ten reports have adopted a legitimacy

frame to explore whether universities have autonomy in deciding their own policies or practices in the context of CET® results. These reports often imply that only authorities such as the Ministry of Education have the power to require students to pass CET® for conferment of a degree. Using the legitimacy frame, these reports question whether universities should have such power. In the case of Extract (7), the sense of a lack of legitimacy in universities' 'local policy' is invoked by a statement from the higher authorities.

**[Extract 7]**

As a matter of fact, the Ministry of Education has never promulgated any regulations that link the conferment of degrees with performance in CET®. However, in more than a decade's time since its establishment, CET® has gradually developed into a national-level test. Taking CET® results as a prerequisite of degree conferment has become a local policy of many universities. (Zhang & Lu, 2013: 7)

Reports using the legitimacy frame further question whether universities should put an extra burden on students through their local practices. It must be noted that the phrase 'local policy' ('土政策' in the Chinese original) has a negative connotation and refers to policies with low legitimacy made by local government officials at will. This phrase is widely used in news reports questioning the legitimacy of the prerequisite policy. These reports make it clear that such practices have received no endorsement from higher authorities.

However, higher authorities do not explicitly forbid such a local practice and that has created much room for policy debate. As a result, four reports use a utility and economic consequences frame to defend CET® by emphasizing the instrumental importance of English and CET® results in personal development, especially in terms of career prospects. Extract (8) from *Sina Education* mentions that despite there being no requirement of CET® results for degree conferment, students still need to perform well in CET®, much more than what is needed to satisfy the precondition for degree conferment in universities that have this practice:

**[Extract 8]**

In a recent job fair, CET® requirements appeared in 26 job descriptions of one single company, whose HR member said: 'We expect CET® results that are more than 470–480 marks because our company participates in both domestic and international business. Up to now there are no better ways to estimate the English proficiency level of a fresh graduate, and that's why CET® is a key criterion.' ...an applicant said, 'CET® is widely recognised and required by society. Without providing its result, those companies won't even bother to read your CV.' (Sina Education, 2015)

Extract (8) highlights the fact that employers expect higher achievements in CET® from university graduates since the passing mark of CET in most universities is 425. Similar reports warned readers, especially university students, who might not be interested in taking English classes, of dire consequences if they failed to achieve better results in the test.

The use of the victim of the bad policy frame, the legitimacy frame and the utility and economic consequences frame in the sampled news reports suggests that discussions about CET® policy practices in Chinese universities can be quite open. Since the central government has issued no explicit guidance on the use of CET®, different groups of vested interests have attempted to convince readers of the need to change or maintain the status of CET® through the media. It must be noted that those who are against the current CET® policy practices have invoked the authority of the central government to support their claims while those who are for the CET® cite the job market to advance their arguments. Both sides have used two powerful discourses and sources of authority in contemporary China, namely, the government and the market, to strengthen their positions.

### Concluding remarks

This paper has focused on interpreting the ‘frames’ adopted by the media coverage of two major English–language examinations in mainland China. Since the media concerned in the analysis are largely controlled by governments at various levels, it is not surprising to see that the frames identified in the analysis of relevant media reports speak for the Chinese government’s control of language policy formulation and implementation. In fact, the government might have used the media to tell readers that ‘noisy guests shall not unseat the host’ (‘喧賓不可奪主’) in language policymaking. In other words, it does not allow its own language education agenda to be undermined by the public enthusiasm for foreign language competence.

As noted in the analysis, the relevant reports have stressed that the Beijing Municipal Government’s decision to reduce the weighting of the English paper in *Gaokao* has received popular support. Those who are against the CET® practice in many Chinese universities have even invoked the authority of the central Chinese government to prevent universities from exercising authority when implementing the practice of using satisfactory CET® results as a graduation requirement. Nevertheless, the relevant media coverage is also indicative of the governments’ willingness to engage different stakeholders in discussing particular language policy initiatives. For instance, the media reports assure readers that the public enthusiasm for learning English has not been affected at all by the new *Gaokao* policy. This indicates that language policymakers might have wanted to avoid confrontation with the public with regard to policy initiatives that are likely to be controversial and unpopular. This also suggests that English is still seen as a strategically important language (Carrió–Pastor & Muñoz–Calderón, 2015). It is the quality of English learning, rather than its quantity, that is more valued in mainland China’s foreign language policy formulation and implementation.

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