

# Learning Text by Heart and Language Education: The Chinese Experience

Xia Yu

Foreign Language School, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, China

**Abstract**—Learning text by heart is a traditional practice in Chinese literacy education. After tracing its development in ancient Chinese literacy education, the article explores how learning text by heart was transferred to foreign language education against the background of the history of English language teaching (ELT) in China. The use of textual memorisation in learning English in recent decades is then surveyed along with a brief discussion of the legendary popularity of *New Concept English*, a UK-imported textbook series. It seems that learning text by heart, contrary to the prediction of foreign experts, is still widely practiced in China as a way of learning foreign languages. This calls for teachers' professional commitment to guiding the students in terms of making good use of this traditional learning practice.

**Index Terms**—China, learning text by heart, history of English education, New Concept English

In recent years, Chinese learners' foreign language learning strategy has received enormous amount of attention among language researchers and teachers (e.g. Gao, 2006, 2007, 2008; Gu, 2003; Jiang & Smith, 2009; Wen, 1996). Text memorisation, as one of the frequently mentioned learning strategies by Chinese learners is drawing increasing interest among Chinese scholars (see Ding, 2004, 2007; Ding & Qi, 2001; Long & Huang, 2006; X. Yu, 2009, 2010). This body of research, which largely focuses on the potential facilitative role of this practice in second language acquisition from a psycholinguistic perspective, attempted to make a positive reappraisal of learning text by heart as a learning device. However, there is a lack of documentation in literature as to how this traditional practice in Chinese literacy education has been built up through the history of English language teaching (ELT) in China.

This article attempts to address the gap through tracing the historical origins and development of textual memorisation in both Chinese literacy education and foreign language education. I will begin the paper by delineating a rough picture of how learning text by heart was practiced and why it had been heavily emphasised in traditional Chinese literacy education. Then, I will discuss how learning text by heart was transferred to and ingrained in foreign language education in relation to the history of ELT in China. After that, I will move on to survey the use of learning text by heart in learning English in recent decades along with a brief discussion of the legendary popularity of *New Concept English*, a UK-imported textbook series. Finally, I will offer suggestions for foreign language teachers and pose directions for future research.

## I. TEXT MEMORISATION IN CHINESE LITERACY EDUCATION

### A. The Practice

Learning Chinese through meticulous study of some Chinese classics till one can learn them by heart has been the pattern that traditional literacy education follows for hundreds of years. Despite the fact that memorisation of classics was highly valued in the literacy education of ancient China, literature on how learning text by heart was practiced remains sparse. A western scholar mentioned it in passing in a book on Chinese tradition:

The Four Books ['The Great Learning' (*Da Xue*), 'The Mean' (*Zhong Yong*), 'The Analects' (*Lunyu*) and 'Mencius' (*Mengzi*)] ... were for six centuries (A.D. 1313-1905) used as school primers, to be recited and memorised, and as the basis of the civil service examinations which selected bureaucracy. (De Bary, 1960, p. 113)

In essence, learning through text memorisation occupied an important place in the traditional, Confucian education prior to the advent of modern China in the 20th century. Boys from wealthy families were said to start their literacy education as early as the age of three using three textbooks: (1) the Trimetrical Classic (*sanzijing*), which 'contained three-character lines of verse consisting of 1,068 characters; (2) the Thousand Character Essay (*qianziwen*) which 'consisted of 1,000 characters in lines of four characters each with no character repeated throughout the entire book'; (3) the Hundred Names Primer (*baijixing*), which 'contained 400 family surnames' (Cleverley, 1985, p. 16). The boys were first required to read these books aloud repeatedly and then expected to memorise them verbatim.

Boys of seven and above were sent to private family school (*Sishu*), starting with the writings from the Confucian Canons which are usually grouped as the Five Classics (*Wu Jing*)<sup>1</sup> and Four Books (*Si Shu*). Students were made to memorise these texts through reciting, drilling, memorising and checking understanding until they were ready to tackle

<sup>1</sup> The Five Classics are 'The Book of Changes' (*Yi Jing*), 'The Book of History' (*Shu Jing*), 'The Book of Poetry' or 'Odes' (*Shi Jing*), 'The Ritual' (*Li Ji*), 'Spring and Autumn Annals' (*Chun Qiu*). Tradition ascribes the authorship or editorship of most of The Five Classics and Four Books to Confucius, but in fact they are a collection of writings from widely different times (Price, 1970).

the imperial civil service examinations (or *keju*). According to Unger (1982, p. 69), a boy on average memorised a new 200-character passage every day for six years and he would have memorised textual materials up to over 400,000 characters by the time he reached age 15. It was documented that Chiang-Kai-shek (1887-1975, former Chinese nationalist leader), when at the age of nine, 'had read and memorised the four Confucian Classics [Four Books]... After that came the Confucian Canons [Five Classics]' (Pakula, 2010).

We can find how such recitation and memorisation was performed in the private family school in the following excerpt:

After the teacher finishes his explanation and checks with the students to see if they have correct comprehension, the students are required to read the text just learned 100 times: slowly at first, then a bit faster. The text should be read with rhythm, correct pauses and accurate use of the four tones. If any student cannot perform the reading-aloud properly, another 100 times of reading are required of him. (Shu, 1961; Chinese original)

A more vivid picture of how learning text by heart was conducted in the classroom is offered by Price (1970):

Texts were committed to memory, with the aid of liberal physical encouragement and much noise. When successfully mastered they were recited by the individual student, back to his teacher, facing the class. The English pronunciation of the word used for this system of learning by heart, *bei*, or to 'back' a text, suggests well the sound of a busy classroom, with each pupil reciting at full voice his peculiar passage. (Price, 1970, p. 95; emphasis [italics] original)

'Liberal physical encouragement' can mean such exaggerated actions as swaying one's body (especially head) slowly to accompany the rhythm of recitation. This traditional practice had such a long-lasting influence that it was still in existence in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This can be attested by the brief mention of the way of studying Chinese in the biography of Madame Chiang Kai-shek (1998-2003), the former first lady in Taiwan:

She [Madame Chiang Kai-shek] was ... in favour of engaging an old-fashioned scholar to tutor her several hours a day in the classics and calligraphy. She memorised her lessons in the traditional way of schoolchildren, chanting them aloud while rocking the body rhythmically. The tutor was 'terribly strict, and expects me to accomplish the almost impossible,' she wrote ... She persevered in her studies for many years, later translating Chinese folk tales and stories from history. (Tyson Li, 2006, p. 43)

It needs to be pointed out that this scenario took place in late 1910s<sup>2</sup>, decades after the introduction of science in the modern sense from the West beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century. As a result of the One-Hundred-Day Reform Movement in 1889, a series of reform measures were undertaken in education, such as the establishment of natural sciences as part of the school curriculum, new-type schools replacing academics of classical learning, and the abolition of the 'eight-legged' essay (Fan & Cohen, 1996). The downplay of classical learning and 'eight-legged' essay, the existence of which might, as will be discussed in the following section, had largely been encouraging text memorisation, can hardly predict the dying of learning text by heart. The far-reaching influence of the tradition of textual memorisation has been substantiated by the fact that it continued to be used in Chinese language education up to the second half of the twentieth century, probably even today. For example, Yu MinHong<sup>3</sup>, a celebrated educator and English teacher who was born in the 1960s, wrote:

In primary and secondary school, all that we had were several thin textbooks. Without any other books to read, we had to recite the texts again and again – so much so that I could recall them till now as if they were carved in my heart. (M.-H. Yu, 2008; Chinese original)

To his disappointment, most of the texts memorised then were about political propaganda. Interestingly, this did not arouse his aversion to the way of learning texts by heart. On the contrary, he commented, 'If only those elite texts on the essence of Chinese culture were included in the textbooks! I believe the memorisation of those classic passages can benefit us for a lifelong time' (ibid). This belief was even transferred to his philosophy of foreign language learning<sup>4</sup>.

The limited documentation of the practice of memorising textual materials, especially classics seems to suggest that this traditional learning habit has palpable Chinese characters inherent to its make-up, characteristics as deeply ingrained as the historical process that developed it was long and slow (Simpson, 2008, p. 382).

### B. Reasons for Heavy Use of Text Memorisation

Emphasis on text memorisation can be said to be historically rooted in the Chinese tradition in education, for it is associated with the Confucian educational philosophy that exalts and worships 'established text', and the fact that '...memorization is seen as a significant part of learning in the Confucian tradition' (Lee, 1996: 36).

Confucianism, as a politico-ethical doctrine, is regarded as conservative by modern Chinese scholars who have noted

<sup>2</sup> Madame Chiang Kai-shek went back to China in 1917 after having been studying in America for ten years. Her parents insisted that she hone her fluency in Chinese when they found that she had difficulties in communicating in her native tongue.

<sup>3</sup> Yu MinHong is the founder and president of New Oriental Education and Technology Group (more commonly New Oriental). He is honoured as the 'Godfather of Study Abroad' among Chinese students. Founded in 1993, New Oriental has grown from a class of only 30 students to China's largest private education service provider with more than three million student enrolments in over 20 schools all over the nation. New Oriental was listed on the New York Stock Exchange in September 2006, the first private education company to achieve this feat. (Source: Xinhua, 2006)

<sup>4</sup> He noted, I have been frequently asked the question of how to learn English well. I can give my full answer in just one sentence: learn by heart any one well-written textbook as fluently as possible. I cannot, of course, recommend the Bible for the fear that people would take me as a preacher. (M.-H. Yu, 2008; Chinese original)

that traditional Confucian schooling usually confined learning to dogmas printed in the textbooks (Ding, 1987). Books, especially those writings which form the Confucian canon, enjoyed the status of ‘absolute and uncontested authority’ (Hayhoe, 1989, p. 12) for thousands of years as they are believed to be

... an embodiment of knowledge, wisdom and truth. Knowledge is ‘in’ the book and can be taken out and put inside the students’ heads. Hence the reverence with which books are treated, the value they are assigned, ... (Maley, 1983, p. 98)

In order to acquire this value, intellectuals had to memorise the classics, and recite and explain them in a way that conformed to the orthodox interpretation (Ding, 1987, p. 51). Therefore, respect for authority and enthusiasm about the value of books, to a great extent, have encouraged the practice of learning text by heart.

An equally, if not more, important contributing factor is the examination system, which some Western scholars have called the Chinese Imperial Civil Service Examination (*keju*) system. Being used for selecting the ruling bureaucracy of China during the long period from the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-906) to the late Qing Dynasty in 1905, this system had far-reaching backwash effects. According to the document ‘Ancient Education’, “Ancient education,” (1998), in the Tang Dynasty, the main subjects of the examination were writing and study of classical books. The examination testing knowledge of the classical books followed the method of filling in blanks. Usually one page of a book was chosen and several lines would be omitted. The candidates were required to fill in the missing lines. Alternatively, they might be required to explain some of the lines in the book. The form and content of the examinations might vary in different times, but what is consistent in the traditional selection system prior to the advent of modern China in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the great importance attached to the memorisation and elaboration of the classics. In most cases, all a candidate had to do during the exam was to write a lengthy essay on a quotation from the classics. This essay was expected to conform to the standard interpretation and from the Ming Dynasty onwards, had to be written in a rigidly formalised style (known as ‘eight-legged’ essay or *baguwen*) that was also modelled after the classics.

Summing up, the Imperial Civil Service Examination set the required standard of ‘mastery of the classics’ as its measure, actually judging the quality of the candidate in accordance with his ability to recite fluently both the texts and their annotations. Little else apart from classics was required in the exam and therefore little else was imparted in traditional schooling (cf. Cleverley, 1985; Spence, 1990). As a result, the need to be able to recite or memorise the officially recognised classic works was paramount.

## II. TEXT MEMORISATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Although a plethora of records document the history of China’s foreign language education (see, e.g. Adamson, 2004; Hayhoe, 1984, 1992; Price, 1970, 1979; Shu, 1961), there is a dearth of accounts of the folk practice of learning text by heart in foreign language learning, especially in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A brief review of the historical development of English language teaching (ELT) in China, however, may shed light on such issues as when and why text memorisation gained its momentum in history as well as our understanding of what is happening in present-day ELT in China. Foreign language education is discussed in this section, even though throughout this paper a primary (although not exclusive) focus is on the teaching/learning of English due to English’s unchallengeable status of being the ‘first foreign language’ in China (Cheng, 2000; Ge, 2003).

### A. A Historical Perspective

For nearly fifty years prior to the founding of People’s Republic of China in 1949, two stages are identified in terms of the development of ELT (Wang, 1986, pp. 153-154). The first stage (1902–1922) is characterised as the ‘Japanese model’ where reading and translation are much emphasised. The second stage (1922-1949) is said to bear the feature of language teaching in Western countries due to the influence of middle schools run by foreign missionaries. There was a ‘continued, though ambiguous, emphasis on English’ (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002, p. 54) throughout the early years of the twentieth century, however, the consequences of widespread foreign language expertise became increasingly ‘ideologically suspect’ (Ross, 1992, p. 242) and some scholars even called for the removal of English and other foreign languages from the school curriculum (cf. Tsang, 1967).

In post-1949 modern China, the fluctuating fortunes of ELT have been seen as a ‘barometer of modernisation’ (Ross, 1992, p. 239). In the early fifties (particular during 1953-1956), there was an abrupt shift from English to Russian for political reasons. English as a subject was deleted from the school curriculum and Russian became almost the only foreign language taught in colleges and universities. Consequently, the Soviet Union exercised a strong influence on foreign language education in China, some of which, for instance, the five-step approach (cf. Penner, 1991; C.-C. Yu, 1984) is still seen even today although it was said to be taking on Chinese characteristics after China broke ties with the Soviet Union (Simpson, 2008, p. 383). Methodologically, the grammar-translation method was adopted to train massive numbers of people to learn Russian with emphasis on vocabulary, translation and grammar in order to understand the revolutionary ideology (Ng & Tang, 1997). Beliefs in foreign language teaching at that time may be best summarised by three-centeredness: teacher-centeredness, textbook-centeredness and grammar-centeredness (see, e.g. Campbell & Yong, 1993; Ding, 1987; Rao, 1996; Ross, 1993; Schoenhals, 1993; L.-X. Tang, 1983). The salient role of textbook at that time is reflected in the following account:

The basis of the method used was a text which was memorised by the students, and in a high proportion of cases

understood with the aid of translation. (Price, 1970, p. 181)

It seems that learning text by heart was naturally integrated into foreign language teaching and learning as a result of the widespread use of grammar-translation method as well as the traditional value attached to textbooks. In what characterizes foreign language teaching approach in China, according to a foreign expert,

A text is not read for meaning but deciphered for extending the vocabulary lists to be learned by heart and for refining the mastery of grammar, supposedly the law of that language. (Scovel, 1983, pp. 105-106)

Following the first intimation of Sino-Soviet tension in the mid of 1950s, there was a slow shift back from Russian to English, which can be termed the 'English Language Renaissance' (Wang, 1986, p. 154). This time, a four skills approach (speaking, listening, reading, writing) was advocated to replace 'deaf and dumb' (*longzi, yaba*) grammar-translation methods (Ross, 1992). Experimental English textbooks used in 1965 were found to be indicative of moves towards oral language production (Audiolingualism) to replace the former emphasis on grammatical rules (Price, 1979). The audio-lingual influences, together with drills and substitution tables, became popular (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002). For instance, English textbook series (e.g. English book (1-4), Ministry of Education, 1961) contain a number of dialogues and significant amounts of oral practice, having features – superficially at least – akin to those of Audiolingualism, which was emerging internationally as a preferred second language pedagogy at the time (Adamson, 2004, p. 88). Although the actual implementation of the teaching reform was restricted due to the inability of the government to find qualified English teachers (Ministry of Education, 1984), it can be speculated that the introduction of Audiolingualism may in a way encourage or firm up the practice of learning text by heart. Despite its indigenous origin, textual memorisation is arguably associated with Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) methodologically<sup>5</sup> probably because both of them emphasise on accuracy as a desired outcome and memorisation as a useful learning strategy (Hu, 2002, p. 102).

The Cultural Revolution beginning at the mid of 1960s led to a nearly stagnant status of English teaching in China because the teaching of English was outlawed for a time. When it was allowed again, the teaching of English was to serve the purpose of cultivating students who are 'both red and expert' (communists and professionals), that is, to teach them enough language to learn the socialist perspective without being tainted with 'bourgeois ideas' (Ford 1986, cited in Simpson, 2008). A turning point in the fortunes of English came when Chairman Mao mentioned in passing in 1968 that '[i]t is good to know English' (quoted in Unger, 1982, p. 282). English was then made to reappear on the school curriculum around 1969 (L.-X. Tang, 1983) with the belief that '[a] foreign language is a weapon in the struggle of life' (a quote from Karl Marx). Not surprisingly, the texts chosen reflect the great concern for transmitting political messages with little attention to pedagogy as '[t]extbooks always began with 'Long live' and ended with 'Quotations' [from Chairman Mao]' (L.-X. Tang, 1983, p. 44). Creative use of the language was thus called into question when the approved method and materials for learning was reciting quotes from Mao's Red Book or Communist newspapers (Simpson, 2008) such as 'Never forget class struggle!' or 'Young educated people must go to the countryside for re-education!' (Wang, 1986, p. 154). The importance of verbatim memorisation in such a socio-political environment is, however, out of question.

After a decade of hiatus in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), English was again seen as important in the reform and modernisation of China although there were occasional fears that it would bring cultural contamination or 'Spiritual Pollution' (Adamson, 2004; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; K.-S. Li, 1995). The demise of the Cultural Revolution marked the beginning of what Sun (1996) calls 'the Development period' (from 1977 up to now), during which Grammar-Translation (GT) and Audiolingualism (ALM) revisited China with the re-entrance of foreigners (Han, 1992). The formal status of foreign language teaching, especially English, rose again in the early 1980s. Studying English is currently prestigious and ELT flourishing in the nation (Dzau, 1990a; Niu & Wolff, 2004).

It is clear from the preceding review that a considerably long period in the history of foreign language education in contemporary China is characterised by 'discontinuity' and a lack of coherent foreign language policy due to social turmoil and tightened political control (see Adamson, 2004 for a fascinating history of English and English teaching in China, especially how political concerns have continuing influence on the English language curriculum). Interestingly, in terms of methodology, foreign language teachers seemed to be able to enjoy the freedom of choosing whatever teaching method they prefer, probably because textbooks are produced with great concern for transmitting political messages with scant attention to pedagogy (Adamson, 2004). When Chairman Mao reinstated the policy of '[l]etting one hundred flowers blossom, letting one hundred schools compete' in the 1950s, it also served as a guiding principle in solving the controversy over the methodology of teaching in China. Chinese open-mindedness in this regard is summarised as follows:

The Chinese concept is that anything that is really bad, or does not work, will eventually die out in the process of competition. Every method has some reason in it, and every new method is developed out of some element from older ones. There is no such thing as absolutely right or good. Methodology is seen as both an art and science. To a great extent, it permits teachers to exercise their individual gifts and talents. (C.-C. Yu, 1984, pp. 34-35)

<sup>5</sup> In investigating ELT practices in secondary-level classrooms in China, Hu (2005: 645) categorises 'Memorization of dialogues & texts' into ALM. Although the Chinese version of audiolingualism (in which emphasis is attached to written language and literary classics) is interestingly contrasted with the original Western version which was developed to enhance conversational proficiency (cf. Lado, 1957; Lado, 1964), it is undoubtedly domesticated in a painless way in the Chinese culture of pedagogy in contrast to the cultural resistance to CLT in China (see Hu, 2002 for a detailed discussion).

It is not surprising that pedagogy reflected in English textbooks published in 1960s (cf. English book (1-4), Ministry of Education, 1961; English book (1-6), Ministry of Education, 1965) did not fit any of the major international English language methods (Adamson, 2004). In fact, any method can be used in English teaching in China, 'from the ancient Chinese tradition of recitation, memorisation, to grammar-translation, pattern- and structure-drill, communicative exercises, or eclecticism<sup>6</sup>' (C.-C. Yu, 1984, p. 35). New features of ELT in post-1949 China may include the amalgamation of a range of pedagogical approaches. Based on the English textbook series (Book 1-3) published in 1960, Adamson (2004, p. 59) noted that the intended pedagogy in these books is 'a blend of the Structural Approach and the Grammar-Translation Method which merges Soviet principles and traditional Chinese English Language teaching practices'. Along with China's reorganising its approach to foreign language education after the schism with the Soviet Union, many changes arose and some of these changes came from the grassroots (Adamson, 2004). Learning text by heart, an indigenous practice transferred from the traditional way of learning and teaching classics may thus easily find its place in language teaching methodology especially under the particular social, economic and linguistic circumstances which have strongly influenced the teaching of English in China since the 1950s.

Based on sporadic mentions of text memorisation in literature, we should surmise that this practice in foreign language learning and teaching is likely to have been continuously existent throughout the discontinuous development of ELT in China. In a case study of foreign language teaching in China conducted in 1960s, Price described how the students made efforts to rehearse the texts for memorisation:

Apart from hearing the recorded text a number of times and repeating it in various ways in class, the students spent many hours reading it aloud. (Price, 1970, p. 182)

... ..

As they get up early in the morning, sounds of reading can be heard near the classrooms and in the sports ground. (Guangming Ribao [Guangming Daily] cited in Price, 1970, p. 182)

It seems that the traditional method of acquiring Chinese literacy – 'reading aloud for memorisation' has been practiced in foreign language teaching and learning at least in the past decades. Interestingly, Price appeared to be predicting the disappearance of this practice by saying '[t]hat such traditional methods die slowly will be attested to by foreign teachers recently working in China'. Is the practice dying, then?

## B. Current Situation

Although Confucian authoritarian education has long fallen into disfavour in modern China and the status of text memorisation as a learning method has thus been challenged (Ding, 2004), the practice of memorising textual materials among Chinese learners seems to be dying hard. Xu GuoZhang (1915-1994), a highly influential foreign language educator had taken 'to recite repeatedly for memorisation' (*long du er neng bei song*) (Xu, 1999) as his maxim of learning English. It is not surprising that memorisation of paragraphs, poems and idioms becomes a regular exercise for learners throughout the whole textbook series (titled *XuGuoZhang English*) Xu has chief-edited. Though this four-volume English textbook contradicts Western culture in many ways, it dominated English study in Chinese university for 39 years ("English Craze Leaders," 2002).

Zhao ShiKai (born in 1920s), a leading linguist in China, noted:

Learning texts by heart is extremely helpful to me. It works much better than memorising individual words in the sense that memorising on the basis of whole passage or at least whole sentence enables us to better understand word meaning, grammar and even rhetorics. The so-called text linguistics and pragmatics we study today are all included in the text. (Zhao, 2002, p. 11; Chinese original)

The experience of learning texts by English heart was, however, not confined to the older generations of English learners. In the online NNEST (Non-Native English Speaker Teachers) caucus forum, I read the following account of an English lecturer born in 1970s:

... when I started to learn English, I did start to develop a flair for learning texts by heart. Fine combing of grammar points, pattern-drills, and **learning texts by heart finally led to my good performance in English in the entrance examinations for higher learning institutions**. So I landed at an English Department. (Y.-Y. Li, 2008; English original; emphasis added)

Li's case is perhaps not atypical of the younger generation of Chinese English learners who employed learning texts by heart as one of their main learning strategies and eventually surpassed their peers in English learning. For instance, a Chinese scholar who was also born in the 1970s mentioned in passing in his thesis:

I started learning English in junior middle school at the age of 12, **memorised words and texts** for the National College Entrance Examination, and later majored in English at a university on the Chinese mainland. (Gao, 2007, p. 8; English original; emphasis added)

A decade later, learning English through text memorisation seems to be exerting continuing influence on Chinese learners. A college student who born in the 1980s was convinced after searching on internet that '[r]ecite as many English passages as possible' might be one of the 'best tools possible' for learning English (see X. Yu, 2010 for a case

<sup>6</sup> In the mid 1980s, efforts were made in secondary schools to reconceptualise foreign language education's 'three-centeredness': teacher-centeredness, textbook-centeredness and grammar-centeredness. Attempt to dislodge the authoritarian hold for teacher, text and grammar-translation methods on foreign language teaching are commonly described by secondary school teachers as 'diversification' or 'eclecticism' (*duoyangxing*) (Ross, 1992).

study).

Today, rather than a dying practice, learning text by heart seems to be still widely practiced in schools throughout China (Ding, 2004; see also Rao, 1996; Hu, 2005; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002). Students may spend hours memorising texts and some teachers require individual students to recite these texts in class or in the teachers' offices (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002). More than half of the participants in a recent study on Chinese learners' strategy use reported the use of memorising and reciting texts to learn English as either an obligatory or voluntary practice in their secondary education in mainland China and their continued effort to memorise English texts or lyrics even when they were studying in a leading English medium university in HongKong (Gao, 2007, p. 159). Learning text by heart as a folk practice seems to be regaining attention from language educators and pedagogical experts in the last decade as more and more cases of successful English learners were reported who claimed to have intensively employed this practice as a learning strategy (see, e.g., Ding, 2004, 2007; Huang & Qi, 2005; Wen, 1996; X. Yu, 2010, 2011). One example in point is that a widely used textbook series for non-English majors at tertiary level, *College English – Integrated Course* (Y.-H. Li, Zhang, & Wang, 2001), set in each unit a regular assignment of learning by heart several (usually 3 to 4) paragraphs in the text. This may epitomise an official recognition of the value of this traditional way of learning.

### C. Learning Text by Heart, Intensive Reading and New Concept English

If the traditional approach to ELT in China is indeed a 'curious combination of the grammar-translation method and audiolingualism, which is characterised by systematic and detailed study of grammar, extensive use of cross-linguistic comparison and translation, memorisation of structural patterns and vocabulary, painstaking effort to form good verbal habits, and emphasis on written language, and a preference for literary classics' (Hu, 2002, p. 93), this approach can be best understood through the Chinese practice of 'Intensive Reading'.<sup>7</sup> This practice consists in

taking students through a text on a word by word, phrase by phrase basis, explaining points of vocabulary, syntax, style and content along the way – rather like the explication *de texte* in the classic French tradition, examination of the language it contains. (Maley, 1983, p. 98)

'Learning sparsely but well' was believed to be a practical and economic way to facilitate language acquisition (Rao, 1996, p. 462). This Soviet tradition of teaching approach, concerning itself with the fine details of language, has been dominant in ELT in China for decades till now. As some scholars (e.g. Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a; Sampson, 1984) pointed out that the Intensive Reading Course is a product of particular social, economic and linguistic circumstances which have strongly influenced ELT in post-1949 China and thus inherent in the fabric of Chinese society. The pervasiveness of 'intensive reading' in Chinese foreign language education and the 'intensive study' view that 'the passages should not just be read for meaning, but also parsed and recited' (Adamson, 2004, p. 69; see also Scovel, 1983, pp. 105-106), may, in no small measure, legitimatise and consolidate the practice of learning text by heart.

If 'intensive reading' has become institutionalised as part of a 'Chinese culture of learning' (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a, p. 184), and it concentrates attention on a necessarily small number of texts in order to squeeze each text dry (Maley, 1983) or learn them by heart, the importance of learning/teaching materials can never be overemphasised. An interesting phenomenon associated with learning text by heart that is mentioning is the wide use of *New Concept English* (Alexander, 1967) among millions of Chinese English learners. Recalling his English learning experience in college, Tang Jun, the most expensive professional manager in China<sup>8</sup> born in the early 1960s, wrote in his biography:

I set a goal for myself. That is, I must learn one text by heart each day. In this way, I memorised all the texts in the first three books of *New Concept English* series. (J. Tang, 2008; Chinese original)

*New Concept English*<sup>9</sup> is a popular UK-imported textbook series which has been used in secondary and tertiary institutions, especially private English training schools. Its vast impact on English teaching and learning in China is such that there is an emergence of a *New Concept English* industry, inclusive of textbooks, supplementary materials, multi-media products, and training programmes (P.-Y. Li, et al., 2004). To the best of my knowledge, it is very likely to be the textbook whose texts have been mostly memorised by Chinese learners (cf. Ding, 2007; Gao, 2008). There is an anecdote which was told by a Chinese netizen and also quoted by a few of my participants in a recent field study to support their beliefs about learning text by heart as well as their worship for the book series:

I heard that there was some guy from Peking University. He memorised all the texts in *New Concept English* book 1, 2, 3, and 4. Later, he went to study in the United States. His professor thought that he copied people's works in writing since he believed that no Chinese could write such native-like essays. To prove his innocence, he asked his professor to name a text in the *New Concept English* textbooks. And he retold it using the exact words ... (Bababa, quoted in Gao,

<sup>7</sup> 'Intensive Reading' is a popular practice in China of carefully analysing the structural and semantic content of a text in detailed and meticulous fashion (see Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a, 1996b; Dzau, 1990b for more discussion). Over the years, it has been subject to much comment and debate. While some scholars that English teachers in China should move beyond 'intensive reading' to more extensive and communicative activities (e.g. Cotton, 1990; Everett, 1990; Liu, 1994; Maley, 1983; Meyer, 1990), others defend the continued use of 'intensive reading' in ELT classrooms (see Harvey, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Tang Jun was crowned as China's 'emperor employee' with an annual salary of 100 million RMB, or 14 million U.S. dollars. He had been working in Microsoft for ten years and was appointed president of Microsoft China in 2002. (Source: crienglish.com, 2008)

<sup>9</sup> First published in 1967, *New Concept English* not only swept the western world but also quickly became the most popular English course in China. In 1997, a new edition was published. This edition was written specifically to address the needs of English learners in China. Since its publication, the sales of the four main books alone, not to mention the support components (supplementary materials and multi-media products), have exceeded 7 million copies. Book One was reprinted 50 times by the summer of 2004. (Source: P.-Y. Li, Ethridge, Yang, & Alexander, 2004)

2008, p. 441)

While the story is likely to be an imagined incident which is at best for us to read for fun, the following reflection by Li PengYi, the President of the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) in China may deserve our attention:

My personal connection with *New Concept English* started 25 years ago, when I first began to learn the language, at the age of 23. We all know that learning a foreign language is a formidable challenge for adults. But *New Concept English* inspired my interest and build up my confidence. Even today I can still recite some passages I studied back then, .... (P.-Y. Li, et al., 2004, p. 21)

As the best-recognised classical English course book, *New Concept English* has been enjoying a legendary and continual success in China and ‘fully established Louise Alexander [the author of *New Concept English*] as the indisputable ELT guru in China’<sup>10</sup> (cf. P.-Y. Li, et al., 2004; McArthur, 2002). The enduring popularity of the book series may lie in the fact that it is not only just a source of information; ‘it is a pedagogical tool’ (P.-Y. Li, et al., 2004, p. 25):

Carefully sequential, consistent, and punctuated with unambiguous directions to both teacher and student, it [*New Concept English*] is perceived as a model of how teachers can guide students to use English actively while simultaneously learning systematic and lexical knowledge. (Ross, 1992, p. 246)

In addition to skilful compilation, the attractiveness of the book series may largely be attributable to careful selection of its texts, which, according to some participants in a recent research (cf. X. Yu, 2011), are much more interesting than the domestically compiled textbooks. There are many good stories in this course book which easily engage the learners’ curiosity, surprise and feelings (P.-Y. Li, et al., 2004) through shared humanity across cultures. I was surprised to discover in a research fieldwork that a state school in a municipality was using *New Concept English* series as their formal textbooks and students were required to memorise some texts or paragraphs selected from this book. This is not only a sign of moving from state-determined towards client-determined in terms of choosing textbooks for ELT in public schools, but also an indication of the public recognition of *New Concept English* in China. The phenomenal success of *New Concept English* in China, however, cannot be explained independently of the fact that ‘intensive reading’ is integrated in EFL teaching at all stages of learning so that a selection of good textbooks is an especially important component of a well-run course in which hours can be spent on explaining, analysing, paraphrasing, reading aloud and retelling the text, until ‘the students very nearly, if not literally, learn very word by heart’ (Rao, 1996, p. 462).

#### D. A Few Words to Teachers

It has been documented in literature that many Chinese students have study habits that would appal Western EFL methodologists and teachers. While certain study habits and conceptions of learning have indeed proven to be obstacles to linguistic development or seriously irrelevant to modern foreign language education, some may be somewhat effectual in Chinese context if they are taken to good use. Methods must be examined and the value of each ascertained, depending on their merit in the Chinese setting (Wu, 1983).

Although it is widely believed that many of the limitations on Chinese students’ learning of English stem from the use of rote-memory strategies (Rao, 1996), a number of Western researchers (e.g. Pennycook, 1996; Sowden, 2005; Watkins & Biggs, 1996) have been convinced that memorisation can lead to high levels of understanding if applied appropriately. Certain elements of traditional Chinese method ‘have been useful and effective, and so they should not be discarded altogether’ (G.-Y. Li, 1990, p. 110). For instance, recent empirical studies show that the practice of learning text by heart not only potentially helps the learner to learn fixed expressions or collocations for subsequent productive use, cultivating ‘a feel for language’ and develop the habit of attending details of language (Ding, 2007), but psychologically enables the learner to build a sense of achievement and self-confidence (X. Yu, 2011). However, it can be potentially insalubrious to the improvement of students’ ‘quality of life’ (Gao, 2009) if the quantity and quality of textual materials are not appropriately controlled. I would thus like to suggest that, for learners who have sufficient reasons to do it or do not mind doing it at all, the teacher should be encouraged to explore techniques or adaptations to maximise the benefits and minimise the side-effects of the practice in foreign language teaching. For example, teachers may ‘empower learners’ by working with them in terms of choice of materials so as to make such an experience personally meaningful to them.

### III. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the article has been to inform the reader of the practice of learning text by heart in Chinese language education in terms of its historical origins and development as well as current situation. Contrary to the prediction of foreign experts, learning text by heart seems to be still widely practiced in China as a way of learning foreign languages. This calls for more research to investigate why and how this traditional practice is being employed as a learning and/or teaching device in Chinese foreign language education. For instance, a qualitative inquiry into how learning text by

<sup>10</sup> Louis Alexander’s vast impact on English teaching and learning in China was reflected in the fact that a bronze statue was raised in his honour in the grounds of the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP), one of China’s largest schoolbook publishers. The inscription on the base of the statue reads: ‘... The man who cracked the linguistic code of the English language and made it learnable for millions of students worldwide through *New Concept English* and many other course books’ (P.-Y. Li, et al., 2004: 20).

heart is perceived by Chinese learners and teachers may shed light on such issues as how the learners can benefit from this practice and what potential problems or difficulties they might encounter. In addition, successful cases of the use of text memorisation in foreign language learning may be carefully studied to demonstrate how 'active memorisation' (as opposed to 'passive memorisation') (X.-P. Li, 2005) or 'good memorisation' (as opposed to 'bad memorisation') (Duong, 2006) can be achieved. More importantly, future research is expected to explore how Traditional Chinese Method (TCM) can be exploited for good use, i.e. how repetition, recitation, mimicry and memorising may be squared with more active and participatory approaches to develop communicative skills (Watkins & Biggs, 1996).

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**Xia Yu** received her PhD at the University of Southampton, UK and is currently employed as Senior Lecturer at Foreign Language School, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, People's Republic of China. Her research interests include educational linguistics, formulaic language, teacher education, second language acquisition and foreign/second language teaching. She has published a number of studies in her areas of expertise, which have appeared in scholarly publications in China, Europe and North America.