

The Development of Community Interpreting Studies in China

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Abstract—Interpreting studies is a young subject in China. Chinese researchers have been making continuous progress in this field but the current studies of community interpreting develop at a relatively slow speed. Thus, the author intends to make a literature review about the development of community interpreting studies in China from monograph, essay and postgraduate dissertation relying on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. The current deficiencies and corresponding suggestions for community interpreting studies in China are also proposed aiming at its more comprehensive and healthier development.

Index Terms—Community interpreting, literature review, problems and suggestions.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Interpreting Studies in China

The Paris Peace Conference in 1919 is widely regarded as the beginning milestone of professional interpreting (Chai, 2007:13) [1]. Interpreting studies as an academic discipline has its origins in the late twentieth century (Pöchhacker, 2015:201) [2].

The development of interpreting studies in China is closely related to the increasing demand for interpreting talents and the formal establishment of interpreting courses in universities. Wang (2019:48) contends that the development of interpreting studies in China has gone through four stages: the Trail-blazing Period from the late 1970s to late 1980s; the Initial Development Period in the 1990s; the Renewal Period in the first decade of the 21st century; and the Diversified Development Period in the second decade of the 21st century. Major achievements of interpreting studies in China are embodied in the improved quality of journal articles, enhanced theoretical and methodological construction, remarkable achievements in interpreting training, outstanding achievements in corpus-based interpreting studies, the emergence of the new generation of researchers, and successful efforts in going global for some Chinese interpreting researchers [3].

However, Zhong and Jia (2015) contend that most interpreting researches in China only emphasize conference interpreting and do not pay enough attention to different interpreting occasions. The reason may be attributed to the relatively low professionalism of community interpreting in China [4]. Professional interpreters are mainly referred to as conference interpreters because they have a fixed business organization (such as the international association of

conference interpreters), unified working conditions, and good remuneration. Meanwhile, the professional status of community interpreting was hard to be admitted, with a common view that this kind of dialogue interpreting is simple and does not require special training. However, community interpreting in China is unable to meet the needs of society. Thus, the talent training and scientific research of it has strong practical significance (Su, 2009:42) [5].

B. The Definition of Community Interpreting

Hale (2007:31-32) defines community interpreting as interpreting in public service institutions and differs from other types of interpreting in a number of aspects (e.g., mode of delivery, interaction situation, level of formality/orality present, level of interpreter involvement, status and roles of the participants, level of professionalization, and power asymmetries) [6]. Compared to conference interpreting, which has achieved the highest level of professionalization within the interpreting world since the 1950s (Pöchhacker, 2004:29) [7], community interpreting is sometimes described as “the poor relation” (Mason, 2001: i) [8], showing that it has long been neglected in interpreting studies. However, Roberts (2002:157) maintains that in spite of its low prestige, community interpreting can be said to be one of the most common and oldest types of interpreting [9]. Throughout the 1990s, community interpreting has gradually become an accepted field of research (Pöchhacker, 2004:28-29) [7].

The two main specializations that fall under the umbrella term community interpreting are medical interpreting and legal interpreting. The other types that take place under the name of community interpreting are too diverse to warrant specialized names. These include welfare, immigration, education, to name just a few. Sign language and aboriginal language interpreting, although with specific particularities not shared by other languages, also fall under the umbrella term of community interpreting (Hale, 2007:30) [6].

There used to be different names for community interpreting and it was until 2004 that a consensus was reached, and community interpreting became the name used by most researchers (Sun, 2013:44) [10]. The study of community interpreting overseas starts earlier than in China and there is relatively abundant literature on community interpreting abroad.

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY INTERPRETING STUDIES IN CHINA

The first major research studies into community interpreting research appeared in the 1980s and concentrated on court and medical settings. The 1990s saw a dramatic increase in the number of research studies and in the breadth

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of topics covered, with a continued predominance of data drawn from the courtroom and medical settings (Hale, 2007:200) [6]. However, compared with western countries, interpreting studies in China started relatively late, let alone those of community interpreting. But in recent years, community interpreting in China has gradually aroused researchers' attention with the emergence of monographs and essays. How community interpreting in China could achieve significant development in the future is also worth further exploration. In this chapter, the author will summarize the progress of community interpreting studies in China from three aspects: monograph, essay, and postgraduate dissertation (literature statistics are in accordance with the writing time of this paper).

A. Monograph

As early as 2007, Sandra Beatriz Hale's *Community Interpreting* [6] provides guidelines for how to perform as an interpreter in community settings, which introduces key concepts and research issues, reports on practical applications, gives advice about conducting research into community interpreting and lists printed and web-based further resources in community interpreting, useful for teaching and learning more about the field (Wadensjö, 2009:103) [11].

In recent years, some Chinese scholars have published books regarding interpreting studies, but there are no monographs written in Chinese that specifically focused on community interpreting until the publication of *Community Interpreting Research in a Global Perspective* (Liu, 2014) [12].

This book covers the long history of community interpreting, its process of professionalization, and the rise of community interpreting studies. Heated topics including the quality and competence of community interpreters, the role of community interpreters, interpreting quality, and interpreting discourse and strategies are all elaborated on. The book provides useful references for scholars who want to dig deeper in this field, which is of great research significance.

Some monographs concentrate on court interpreting. *English-Chinese Bilingual Glossaries of Legal Interpretation in Common Law Courts (U.S. and U.K.)* (Zhang & Jiang, 2020) contains about 3000 terms commonly used in legal practice in British and American courts, with bilingual definitions [13]. *A Study of the Role of Court Interpreters* (Cao, 2018) deeply analyzes the role of court interpreters and discusses the causes and solutions of role conflicts faced by interpreters through theoretical analysis, questionnaires and interviews. This book tries to break the relatively closed vision of interpreting studies, draw on the existing results of other disciplines, and initially construct a three-dimensional theoretical framework of the court interpreter's role [14].

B. Essay

The earliest paper in China focusing on community interpreting can be traced to 2006 and the number and quality of journal papers have steadily increased.

CNKI is a credible database that consists of authorized information such as journals, newspapers, postgraduate and doctoral theses, conference papers, books, patents, and so on. According to CNKI search results based on keywords "Community Interpreting", "Court Interpreting" and "Medical Interpreting", the author excluded those not taking

them as the main research subjects and made a literature review about 29 journals in total, as seen in Fig. 1. It should be noted that considering the quality of the essays, only those published in Peking University Core Journals are included.

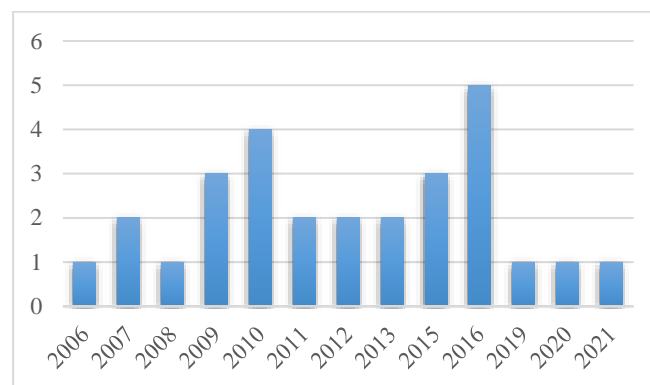


Fig. 1. The number of journals searched by keywords on CNKI.

The trend of essays on community interpreting could be seen from the above figure. Even though the study of community interpreting in China started late, scholars are making continuous contributions and in 2016, the number of publications reached a small peak.

Three essays among the publications focus on medical interpreting and 19 essays center on court interpreting, with 1 taking telephone interpreting as the research subject. Some essays are listed below chronologically. Liu (2006) analyzes the characteristics and dilemma of court interpreting in America [15], followed by a period when the main research focus is court interpreting (Wang & Yang, Gao & Liu, Guo, 2007; Zhao & Chen, 2008) [16]-[19]. Xiao and Yu (2009) study the new trend of telephone interpreting [20]. Based on the characteristics of community interpreting, Su (2009) introduces its development in China, summarizes the problems, and puts forward corresponding solutions [5]. Then in 2010, Su reviews the current status of medical interpreting in China and analyzes the multiple roles of medical interpreters by adopting a case study [21]. Zhao and Zhang (2011) focus on the exploration of the court interpreter's role [22]. Liu and Zhang (2012) collect 1426 foreign literature on community interpreting research in the past 40 years, establish a database, and analyze it through scientific measurement, in an attempt to discover its development process, characteristics, and trends [23]. Deng and Wen (2012) investigate the situation of community interpreting services in China from both quantitative and qualitative aspects [24]. Hu (2016) explores the role of community interpreters [25] while Zhang (2016) systematically summarizes the current status of community interpreting research from the perspectives of research topics, methodologies, and research effectiveness and points out the future development direction [26]. Zhao and Dong (2019) put forward suggestions for the law of court interpreting in China [27] whereas Liu and Zhang (2021) review academic papers on medical interpreting research and note that there is a big gap between domestic and international research in this field, so the research topic should be more consistent with the reality of medical interpreting in China [28].

From the above review, it can be seen that Chinese researchers have worked continuously on community interpreting, especially the review of community interpreting

research and exploration of community interpreter's role. Court interpreting, compared with medical interpreting, has attracted more attention. However, there remain some shortcomings as few of them turn to carrying out empirical studies, with Su (2010) as a particular exception [21]. The research topics are relatively single, with less attention to evaluation or professionalization of community interpreting in China, which could become important research topics in the future.

C. Postgraduate Dissertation

Postgraduate thesis and doctoral thesis are important sources of literature in interpreting research, and also an important force to promote interpreting research. According to the keyword search of "Community Interpreting" on CNKI, there are 27 postgraduate theses in total taking it as the research subject, with students from Xiamen University, Shanghai International Studies University, Xi'an International Studies University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, etc., seen in Fig. 2. and Fig. 3.

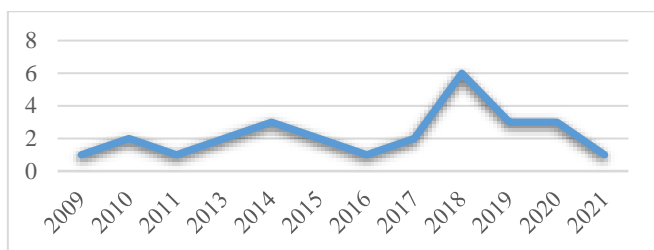


Fig. 2. The number of postgraduate dissertations of community interpreting on CNKI.

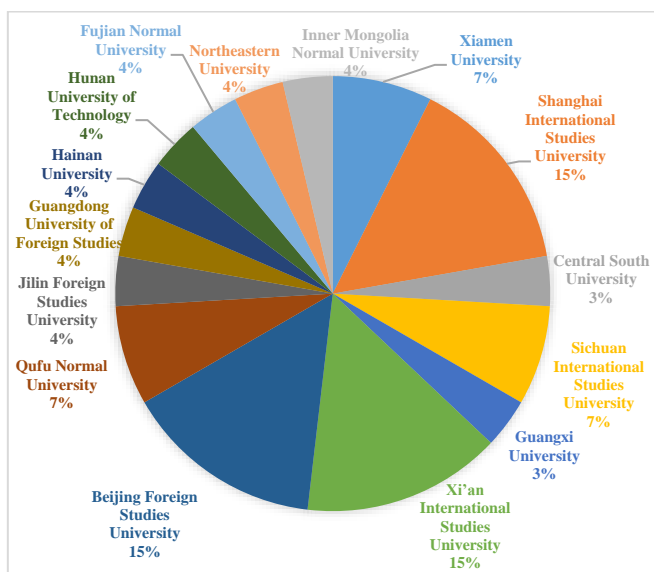


Fig. 3. Affiliations of postgraduate theses.

Some postgraduate students carry out empirical studies to analyze community interpreting strategies and dig out community interpreters' roles. Preparation and professional ethics are also their research focuses. It is worth noting that Liu (2014) reviews the literature on community interpreting in western countries and China since 1980s [29]. Meanwhile, among the 27 theses, 4 of them focus on translation and commentary of books and chapters related to community interpreting, which also indicates the increasing attention paid to it.

There are more postgraduate theses taking interpreting

under legal and medical settings as the main themes, which will not be elaborated on in this paper. However, it is worth mentioning that there are 2 doctoral dissertations on legal interpreting. Sun (2017) studies the goal equivalence in institutional discourse translation taking discourse marker in court interpreting as an example [30]. Cao (2018) analyzes the role of court interpreters and discusses the causes and solutions of role conflicts, adopting qualitative and quantitative methods [31].

III. CURRENT PROBLEMS OF COMMUNITY INTERPRETING STUDIES IN CHINA

In the past 40 years of reform and opening up, although the research of community interpreting has maintained a good momentum of development, there are still some deficiencies. Community interpreting research in China is not systematic and has few in-depth studies.

Zhang (2016:24-25) points out five key problems of community interpreting studies, the impact of research needs to be improved; the practicability of the research is not outstanding, and the application effect needs to be strengthened; the diversity and systematization of research methods need to be strengthened; multi-party dynamic mechanism of quality assessment has not been established; the system of teaching exploration needs to be enhanced [26].

In this chapter, the author will make further illustrations according to the above classification.

A. Limitation of Research Impact

From the analysis in Chapter II, most researchers of community interpreting are from universities, including professors and students. There is little cooperation between academia and industry and some of the students have not accumulated enough experience in community interpreting. Chinese researchers are mostly from the single background of translation studies or linguistics, and their interdisciplinary intersections need to be strengthened.

While in some foreign countries, many researchers are professional community interpreters who are familiar with community interpreting and exposed to problems in this field almost every day, which makes their research results more convictive and applicable.

As Zhang (2016:24) notes, so far, there is still no unified opinion on the definition and category of community interpreting, which has seriously affected a series of related work such as quality evaluation, market norms, training, and education of community interpreting [26]. Currently, there are few studies in China focusing on these aspects.

Compared with abundant monographs of community interpreting in western countries, those in China are still in shortage and there are currently no works on medical interpreting, which can be used as useful guidelines for community interpreting research and practice.

B. Unevenly Distributed Research Topics

From the illustration of essays in Chapter II. B, court interpreting is still the main theme. Medical interpreting and telephone interpreting have been relatively neglected. Even though some essays focus on the development trend and current status of community interpreting in China, research

on community interpreting in the professional field is still relatively scarce. At present, there are few empirical studies on the quality or evaluation system of community interpreting in China, most of which are postgraduate theses.

In addition, there are few original research results as many scholars still focus on introducing Western theories, following western research directions and trends, or making comparisons with foreign community interpreting systems. The innovation consciousness of theories and methodologies needs to be enhanced, and the academic sensitivity towards new problems and perspectives needs to be improved.

C. Single Research Methodology

Zhong (2012:67) points out in *Methodology in Interpreting Studies* that in the history of interpreting studies, after a period of research in which the primary methodology was emotional statement, experience summary, and subjective introspection, there is now a consensus that research conclusions should be established on scientific evidence [32]. However, most essays on community interpreting focus on literature review and theoretical deduction. It may be true that some postgraduate theses include empirical studies, but they only focus on case studies. The scale of surveys is limited and the objective empirical data is insufficient, leading to the fact that the research results could not be applied widely in this field. Moreover, the empirical studies are not continuous or standardized in terms of survey scope, sampling standard, and statistical procedures, which makes it difficult to ensure the universality of research conclusions. Cao (2018) applies the triangulation research methodology combining qualitative and quantitative methods in her doctoral thesis, but this is still not widely applied in research [31].

D. Unestablished Evaluation Criteria for Community Interpreting

Quality is a major concern in a much broader sense in community interpreting, where a certain level of professional service delivery has yet to be assured (Pöchhacker, 2015:335) [2]. At present, the evaluation of community interpreting quality is mostly subjective judgment and analysis by researchers. Although the influence of the communicative environment has been fully considered, the opinions of other parties in the process have not been fully collected and analyzed (Zhang, 2016:25) [26].

On the other hand, in China, we do not have a specific accreditation test for community interpreting currently. Some countries, like Britain and Australia, have already developed their systems. According to the official website of the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NATTI) in Australia, The Credentialed Community Language (CCL) test is an assessment of the language abilities at a community level. Two significant factors that contribute to assessment are Language Quality and Language Register.

Moreover, having an official criterion for the evaluation of community interpreting can accelerate the establishment of the certification and relevant tests, which may probably increase the status and professionalization of community interpreters in China.

E. Unsound Training System for Community Interpreting

The state of community interpreting as a profession differs according to country (Pöchhacker, 2015:67) [2]. Training is probably one of the most complicated and problematic aspects of community interpreting. The many issues surrounding training can be divided into four broad areas: lack of recognition for the need for training; absence of a compulsory pre-service training requirement for practicing interpreters; shortage of adequate training programmes; and quality and effectiveness of the training (Hale, 2007:163) [6].

Generally, in countries that have a long history of immigration, such as Australia, Canada and Sweden, the profession is better established, with university degrees and other training courses, accreditation or certification examinations, professional associations and industrial unions promoting the interests of their members. In some of these countries, there is even training for those who use interpreting services, to guide them in working collaboratively with interpreters (Tebble, 2012) [33].

In some western countries, universities have already erected training sessions for community interpreters. However, in China, the training for community interpreting has not been paid as enough attention as conference interpreting. The teaching objectives, teaching mode, curriculum system, teaching content, assessment standard, and procedure of it have not been fully demonstrated.

IV. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY INTERPRETING STUDIES IN CHINA

Based on the problems in Chapter III, suggestions will be provided for the development of community interpreting studies in China in terms of research, evaluation system and training for community interpreting.

A. Research

In Chapter III. A, it is not hard to see that at present, community interpreting researchers are mainly from universities. In order to achieve improvements, it was time that all participants involved in interpreted events, took some of the responsibilities for quality (Ozolins & Hale, 2009:2) [34]. Therefore, a multi-party research model should be established by interpreting researchers, community service agencies, and communication parties to fully and accurately grasp the evaluation and expectation of interpreting services, thus having a deeper and more objective judgment towards the quality of community interpreting services and influencing factors (Zhang, 2016:25) [26]. The involvement of multi parties could increase the persuasion of empirical studies and gain first-hand statistics. Meanwhile, if possible, university researchers could actively seek interdisciplinary cooperation.

According to the analysis in Chapter III. B, the research subjects are relatively single and scholar's interdisciplinary awareness seems to be weak, among which Ren and Xu (2013) analyze community interpreting from the perspective of sociolinguistics [35] as well as Zhao and Yang (2020) study court interpreting with the guidance of rhetorics [36]. Researchers could pay more attention to the evaluation of community interpreting quality and professionalism of

community interpreting, which have been paid less attention to in the past research. Meanwhile, whether the evaluation of community interpreting in different specializations should be separated is worthy of exploration. An objective understanding of the role of community interpreters in the field of specific realms is the only way to fully evaluate the role and function of community interpreters (Zhang, 2016:25) [26].

As for research methodology, Zhang (2016:26) maintains that interdisciplinary research methods should be the trend for future community interpreting research to deepen the level and improve the quality. While perfecting the case study method, massive investigations should be done. Building of corpus could improve the representativeness of research conclusions, and expand the data scale to improve the universal significance of research conclusions [26].

Wang (2019:50) contends that the doctoral dissertation is an important symbol of systematic and in-depth research in a subject area [3]. More doctoral students could consider taking community interpreting as their research subject and adopt interdisciplinary research methods to promote the development of this field.

B. Evaluation System

The lack of quality evaluation is not conducive to the professionalism of community interpreting. Apart from the evaluation system, it is also important to have an organization that could regulate and supervise community interpreters.

Zhang (2016:26) proposes that the integrity and correlation of all relevant factors within the evaluation system of community interpreting quality should be established, such as standards, evaluation content, evaluation subjects and objects, evaluation channels and means, evaluation procedures, and feedback mechanisms, etc. The consistency between the evaluation system and the community interpreting environment should be ensured [26].

China could gain some experiences from abroad. To ensure that community interpreting could develop healthily, the establishment of an evaluation system for community interpreting cannot be ignored. Ideally, with its building and the creation of conditions, the regulation organization could rise in response to the proper time.

C. Training

In Chapter III. E, the main problems surrounding training for community interpreting proposed by Hale (2007) have been listed [6]. To promote the training of community interpreting in China, it is significant to recognize its need. Su (2009:42) notes that training for community interpreters has strong practical significance [5]. Interpreter educators should take on the responsibility of raising awareness among users of interpreting services regarding the complexities of the interpreting process, the social consequences flowing from incompetent interpreting, and the consequent usefulness of interpreter pre-service training and in-service professional development. Such awareness-raising is best accomplished through the pre-service education of the professionals who work with interpreters. Components on working with interpreters would be an ideal addition to legal, medical and other service profession degrees. Educators also have the responsibility of ensuring that the training they offer is effective in improving interpreters' performance. To

accomplish this they need the support of university administrators and of the profession itself (Hale, 2007:194) [6].

Meanwhile, with the establishment of an evaluation system for community interpreting, interpreter educators could design and adjust their sessions according to specific goals to improve the skills of community interpreters.

Zhang (2016: 26) also highlights the importance of meta-training, which means training users of interpreting services and relevant agencies on the nature, function, and application of community interpreting to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of it [26].

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the author has illustrated the development of community interpreting studies in China and the progress researchers have made. However, community interpreting and its research in China are still in infancy, and still lack many aspects of basic description and rational analysis. By collecting the achievements in monograph, essay, and postgraduate dissertation, the author has pointed out some deficiencies and tried to raise suggestions accordingly. The low professionalism of community interpreters and the lack of an efficient evaluation system and training programme need to be weighted. The author sincerely hopes that in the future, scholars can pay more attention to community interpreting and this paper could illuminate researchers who are interested in this field.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Xinyi Gao conducted the research, collected the data, made the analysis and wrote the paper.

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