

# **“Chicken and Duck Talk”: life and death of language training at a Japanese multinational in China**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines social relations in language learning through a case study of two cohorts of Chinese workers in a Japanese multinational company (MNC). The two cohorts weigh learning Japanese in the context of internal and external opportunities, and pursue different strategies - *deliberative acquisition* and *deliberative opposition*. Exploring the broader meanings of language learning beyond skill acquisition, the article suggests that language is more than an individual asset or a common code for workers to build collective power. Social reproduction of language is embedded in workers' choice of pathways for social mobility which was created in the social transition and has shifted over time in China. These findings make a contribution to the sociology of language training in work, by challenging structural and cultural theories that underplay the agency of workers in assessing language as a resource for labour power development.

## **Key words**

language training at work, social mobility in China, cultural control, labour agency, labour process, skill training, cohort analysis, Japanese multinationals

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*“These [new] workers use the same phrases as we do, yet they speak a totally different language. It is like chicken and duck talk.”*

A line-supervisor commenting on communicating quality control procedures to his team

## **Introduction**

Sociological analysis of language learning views linguistic proficiency as a social asset.

Against the background of globalisation, language learning is understood in association with the notion of transnational mobility, allowing individuals to exploit cross-country economic opportunities (Liversage, 2009), build social resources beyond geographical boundaries (Samaluk, 2015) and mitigate hostility in a foreign society (Thuesen, 2016). These works imply the utilitarian value of language proficiency for social advancement, although little is known about the tactics that individuals deployed to pursue social advancement through language acquisition. Neither is there adequate understanding of the socio-economic and socio-political agenda underlining these tactics.

Language acquisition is directly linked to social progression in multinational companies (MNCs), especially where workers are required to communicate in a language that is not widely spoken in their own society (San Antonio, 1987). Training serves the management purpose of preparing, unifying and potentially retaining workers. Provision of language training often reflects the misalignment between a language’s workplace-based value and its tradable value in the wider society. Language training also perpetuates cultural domination. To workers, language acquisition is necessary in order to continue to reproduce their labour power and to progress in an existing organisational structure. Tied to reproduction, workers’ social identity is articulated, consolidated and reinforced in learning activities (Willis, 1977). Language learning in transnational workplaces is therefore not only the pragmatic acquisition of multi-linguistic skills, but also for the workers to cope with an identity forced upon them (Fairclough, 2007) and to forge collective social support from within and outside the workplace (Thuesen, 2016). In this sense, learning entails social relations played out at the point of reproduction – emphasising a deliberative choice, either individually or collectively. As such, workers’ choices foreground a contextualised

perspective on language acquisition, which this article aims to further investigate through cohort analysis.

Putting social relations at the centre of examining language acquisition, the focus of this article is on agency exercised in language learning. What enables workers to choose to 'take it or leave it' when offered language training? How do workers' choices reflect their assessment of the social opportunities created by MNCs in the country where they work? Addressing these questions will help refocus the study of language acquisition within the social space where labour power is reproduced.

Taking a holistic ethnographic case study approach (Moore, 2011), the article documents the introduction, implementation and abandonment of language training offered to the entire local workforce in a Japanese invested textile fibre manufacturing plant in China. Disparate discourse of learning emerged in the workplace ethnography, with contrasting views and reactions towards training from two cohorts of Chinese workers. Explaining the two cohorts' tactics as *deliberative acquisition* and *deliberative opposition*, the study shows that the socio-economic and socio-political context of work is at the heart of understanding the differences between the cohorts. These empirical findings offer a critique of both the normative-managerialist approach which emphasises the technicality of language use at work and the critical-culturalist approach which views language training as a form of domination and hegemonic control of the local workforce. The data reveals the intrinsic conflicts which shape how training was viewed and interpreted by the different orientations workers bring towards the opportunities to enhance their labour power capacity and social status. These different orientations are themselves fashioned from changing pathways of social mobility within a Chinese society undergoing major economic transition.

The article is organised in five sections. The following section reviews the literature on the social relations of language training in MNCs, with a focus on normative-managerialist approach; a critical-culturalist approach; and a labour process approach. This article builds on the labour process approach, but further explores how the societal context flows into workers' choices. The methods of collecting and analysing qualitative data are discussed, before reporting the research findings and discussing these in a separate section.

The article concludes that training has to be understood as part of the work process, in which social context plays a significant part in shaping the outcome of training through workers' individual and collective agency.

## **Literature review**

Language demarcates social groups. The idea that language is a *class code* is advanced by the work of Bernstein (1971). The key point that differences between public and formal language highlights the importance of *context* for learning is critical for this article. Similarly, Bourdieu (1991) sees language as a form of cultural capital that gives advantage in society, and reproduces class and power structures. Language can therefore be seen as underpinning power structures in social relationships. The construction of meaning through corporate language policies can be interpreted as an exercise of power to legitimate cultural domination in MNCs (Vaara et al 2005). Viewing language acquisition as structural or biological code, however, provides limited space for individuals to engage in reflexive action, and misses the contestation involved in language acquisition, especially within the institutional boundaries of the capitalist firm. Three approaches to language acquisition are relevant in this context.

### ***Normative-managerialist approach***

A normative-managerialist approach views language as a 'transnational cultural asset' for all workers. Language is often presented as supplementary to other skills required to perform work tasks in workplaces, especially in countries with limited multi-linguistic education (Kubota, 2013). To workers, language acquisition addresses their needs to overcome the linguistic 'barriers' encountered in transnational workplaces. It is also in the interests of management to develop workers with such skills as language proficiency (especially those that are not widely spoken), cultural aptitudes and cross-country adaptability, which are difficult or costly to source. Workers have their interests in developing the skills that enable them to adapt to a different working environment and accumulate more value for their labour power.

Normative-managerialist explanations of language acquisition are in line with the conceptualisation of language as a code that marks social divisions. Portraying a prospect

for workers to progress through firm-bound career structure that transcends geographical borders, *acquisition* of multi-linguistic skills is often considered beneficial for workers to become technically and socially competent in transnational workplaces. At the individual level, language acquisition allows workers to access resources, take advantage of job opportunities, and participate in power structures. *Opposition* to adopting a unified or common language comes from criticism that such pragmatic prescriptions neglect the cultural meaning of language use in transcending or dominating local and/or minority languages (Fairclough, 2007, Sonntag, 2009; Boussebaa, et al, 2014). A theme largely missing from the discussions in this approach is workers' contestations over established agendas of skills and training, which have long been recognised as a ground of conflicting social relations at the workplace (Penn, 1985).

### ***Critical-culturalist approach and language training***

Apart from building human capital and improving competencies, productivity and efficiency, unified language is there to integrate a diverse workforce into a corporate community. Language training is widely adopted by MNCs to coordinate operations across countries, facilitate knowledge transfer and knowledge creation, and build international and cross-functional teams. Workers, regardless of their native tongue, are expected to be able to learn and use the in-work language. The design of training programmes is therefore prescriptive and instrumental, with the assumption that after undergoing such training, workers will be able to acquire the knowledge, attitudes and even new cultural identity suitable for working in a transnational environment (Black and Mendenhall, 1990).

The critical-culturalist approach builds on the theoretical assumption that language is a construct of domination and control. Workers can be entrapped by language training, removed from native identity, manipulated through language discourse, and generally rendered powerless to resist training in a dominant *lingua franca*, especially when this is allied with the discourse of globalisation (Fairclough, 2007). There is a strong theme in socio-linguistics that considers the globalization process as producing the commodification of language and identity (Heller, 2003; Mooney and Evans, 2015). Companies and corporate culture are given a central role in controlling the workforce. "The talk about corporate culture tends to be optimistic, even messianic, about top manager's moulding cultures to

suit their strategic ends ... an ideology cultivated by management for the purpose of control and legitimation of activity” (Smircich, 1983: 346).

Much of the critical-culturalist literature on language use at work has revealed the comparative situations where ‘language training’ gives rise to cultural control, especially in international call centres (Taylor and Bain, 2005; Das, et al, 2008; Russell and Thite, 2008; Sonntag, 2009; Nath, 2011) and Japanese transplant research (Elger and Smith, 2005). International call centres employ cheaper labour, but have high operating costs and encounter problems in overcoming cultural and linguistic differences between Western customers and Indian operators. Poster (2007: 273) in studying the training of ‘American’ English in Indian call centres discussed this as a form of “national identity management” – a labour regulation “strategy in which ethnicity and citizenship are considered malleable and subject to managerial control.” However, call centre research, which has been central to a critical-culturalist view of language training, is more specifically about accent alteration, name and location masking (Nath, 2011: 710) and not the acquisition of the language of the parent company. Language acquisition in this context is a pragmatic choice: to get on, language skills are necessary. This focus on acculturation underestimates the agency of workers, in taking on or resisting such a language or the norms, attitudes, values embodied in language training.

### ***Labour process and language training***

Finally, the third approach draws largely on labour process theory (Thompson and Smith, 2009; 2010) to examine training as part of the social process of work. Labour process theorists challenge simple assumptions about shared benefits of training or cultural incorporation in MNCs, highlighting the social-structural divide between management and workers in the workplace (Edwards and Belanger, 2009). Fundamental conflicts of interest between management and workers shape both management policies and workplace cultures, and such contradictions are well documented by scholars examining resistance at work (Edwards and Scullion, 1982; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Within a labour process perspective, training cannot be isolated from the wider dynamics of workplace conflict. The provision and removal of skills and skilled workers is central to the imperative of control extensively discussed in the labour process literature (Thompson and Smith, 2010). Power

struggles have always been present in the social processes of work in MNCs (Edwards et al. 2013). Training is a critical part of this contested space in multinationals (Morgan and Kristensen, 2006), where neutrality of knowledge and commonality of interests are often challenged. What is worth further exploring here is how conflicting interests are expressed or repressed, negotiated or combated, in training, and, how these can drive the direction and outcomes of firm-organised training.

Employers' reasons for investing in training are generally associated with preparing and retaining worker skills. For workers, although training can be consistent with their interest in self-development and career advancement within the firm, the value of acquired knowledge, skills and experiences can also be cashed-in through exit (or threatening exit) from the firm, using what can be called their 'mobility bargain' as workers (Smith, 2006). In this sense, training organised by firms can potentially enhance employee mobility beyond the firm, especially when internal mobility and job security are eroded by pressures experienced under today's more competitive conditions. Training, like wages and working conditions, sits inside the structural polarities within the employment relationship and not in a neutral space of inherently shared interests and mutuality. Building on the labour process approach, this study further examines how workplace-based skills contestation is strongly informed by the wider social context. To do so, cohort analysis is adopted.

## **Research methodology**

The article adopts a holistic ethnographic case study approach, which allows researchers to compile multiple sources of data to examine a social phenomenon in its context. The main purpose here is not to measure the effectiveness of training that, arguably, is not directly observable. Rather, the aim is to capture training as a work process, experienced and constructed by workers in connection with other work processes (e.g. entry into/exit from the firm, performance appraisal and career advancement).

### ***Data collection***

The case company selected for this research is a typical case of a re-exportation oriented Japanese manufacturing plant, producing synthetic fibre. In order to cut costs, the firm relocated its main production site to China during the mid-1990s. At the time, the site

contributed 15% of the MNC's global production and more than 95% of the products were shipped back to Japan or Japanese-owned firms in China. The plant adopted semi-automated machinery and relied on low-skilled workers, with migrant workers constituting the majority of the workforce<sup>1</sup>. The plant is divided into two weaving factories and two dyeing factories. The average age of the workforce was 25.2, with the majority of the workforce in their early to mid-20s. Management showed a general optimism in the potential of training the local workforce with attempts to transfer aspects of the Japanese employment and production system into the subsidiary plant. This observation puts this single case in the wider context of Japanese transplants overseas, which has been studied extensively by existing researchers (See Elger and Smith, 2005; Zheng, 2012). What makes the case distinctive is the scale and continuity of the language training provided to the local workforce, which made possible this in-depth study with a focus on local workers.

Data were collected in two phases. The first visit to the plant was in 2007; two years after all local workers were offered language and cultural training. One of the authors stayed as a non-participant observer at the plant for a month. Interviews were conducted with 54 local workers at all levels. Each interview lasted 60 to 120 minutes. They were asked to describe their training experiences, their assessment of how useful the training programme had been for their current position and future career development plans. Nine Japanese expatriates and a training course leader were also interviewed. All interviews were conducted in the interviewees' native language, and translated into English by the authors. Observations were made both in the training room and at work. The researcher also accessed company documents. In the second phase, the researcher returned to the plant in 2010, when the company was undergoing a review of the provision of this training programme. Further interviews were conducted with both expatriates and locals to understand the development of the training programme.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis follows an abductive approach (Edwards, et al., 2014). Workers' responses towards the firm-organised training programme were categorised into two broad clusters: acquisition and opposition. Within each cluster, the narratives were coded according to the forms of identification (Carmeli, 2005) and the repertoire of worker opposition (Bélanger



and Thuderoz, 2010). Themes were recorded as the authors moved between the code and the data to examine the relationships between individual's experiences with their training and general attitudes towards the firm-organised training programme. One of the themes that emerged was *time*. A timeline of the training programme was delineated, beginning when the programme was introduced in the plant and ending when it was terminated. The training programmes had two key phases: piloting and transmission. By locating the entry point when an individual received training on this timeline, the local workforce was divided into two cohorts, which were named chicken with the code CK (those trained at the piloting stage) and duck with the code DK (those who received training at the transmission stage). Each cohort's views on their own experiences and their views on the other cohort were gathered and then compared. Expatriates' comments [coded as EX], company documents and fieldwork notes were used to triangulate with the local workers' self-reported views and experiences. Analysis was cross-checked by referring back to the data and drawing on the concept of social agency (Meyer and Jepperson, 2000), from which overarching themes emerged.

## **Findings**

### ***Plant-wide training: a management discourse of learning***

Language training derives from a management agenda to build a 'transplant' in China. The management assumption underpinning the provision of language training was *instrumental*: fresh vocational school graduates, who were believed to be more capable in language learning, formed the majority of new recruits. Workers were not expected to pass any exams or obtain language qualifications. If they did manage to pass professional language tests, a skill development allowance was added to their pay. Overall, the idea was not that the local workers would obtain professional qualifications, but that they would be able to use Japanese language at work - understand the work manuals, follow the quality check-lists and keep logistical records. Japanese formed part of the technical code required to perform work tasks: production machinery with Japanese instructions was relocated from Japan, the operating system was in Japanese and quality standards strictly followed those of the parent company for the products to be shipped back to Japan. Workers who learned Japanese

quicker and better were rewarded by higher pay, further training, and job progression opportunities.

Many writers have identified Japanese firms as strong on cultural control (Miroshnik and Basu, 2014). Language is also a cultural code used by management to manipulate workers behaviour. This is exemplified in language training playing a part in controlling employee turnover. In theory, in situations of high labour market mobility firms should restrain from investing in training workers' general skills, as these have external market value and may facilitate turnover not labour retention. However, in China's case, discrepancies in the vocational training meant that employers withdrawing training of general skills would undermine the firms' ability to compete on product quality. The general manager of the company explained: 'training and retention work hand-in-hand. Those who recognised the value of the company will stay and thrive with the company.' More sophisticated technical skill training was delayed and workers were expected to develop language skills that were 'required to understand the advanced training'. Skilled and semi-skilled workers were in high demand in the local labour market and annual labour turnover was at times as high as 40%. In this sense, introducing a corporate language set a bar for local workers and a condition for further technical and managerial training. Work knowledge also became more contextualised and less transferrable, if the workers left the company within a relatively short time.

***Disparate discourse of language acquisition among two cohorts of workers:  
deliberative acquisition and deliberative opposition***

Comparing workers' responses to language training between the two cohorts, the CK cohort embraced the use of Japanese as a technical code: they understood the technical terms and were able to use Japanese for formal communication, at company meetings and writing reports. By the end of 1999, a majority of the local workers had managed to gain some Japanese language skills, and 15 were selected for further training in Japan. The workers also acknowledged training as a positive experience, which led to progression in their jobs.

*"Training has been essential for all of us. I think we all find it useful to learn a new language, new technology and new management knowledge." (CK-03)<sup>i</sup>*

*Training is on-going, but yes taking the first step and learning Japanese is the entry level requirement [of my] job. (CK-09)*

The CK cohort's endorsement of firm-organised language training cannot be simply understood as identification with the value of linguistic skills assigned by the firm. Neither did engaging in the workplace-based language training mean their subscription to a management discourse of reproducing a transplant of the parent firm. In fact, many distanced themselves from becoming merely 'agents of the headquarters' or 'replacement of the Japanese'. Rather, their attitude towards firm-organised language training is *deliberative acquisition* – pursuing status gains by aligning firm-based resources with the exploration of social opportunities. Such a sense of *deliberative acquisition* is articulated by the Head of Production when he explained his vision of the plant's future:

*"We won't let this plant to be closed if the Japanese parent firm decide to retreat from the Chinese market. This is why we must continuously develop our knowledge and ability to run the factory. And, to do so, we need to be fluent in Japanese for now." (CK-07)*

Language acquisition tied in with advantages and the possibility of displacing senior management. This shows workers agency in deliberative acquisition, which helps them build resistance to the dominant management discourse of learning transmitted through firm-based language training.

The DK-cohort, by contrast, was much less enthusiastic about taking on language training, although this was not related to their ability in passing language proficiency tests. Many conceded that language training was positive.

*"Look, this factory is not bad. I have worked in other companies and you seldom get Saturdays and Sundays off, let alone having dedicated time for training." (DK-01)*

Opposition to the use of Japanese as a technical code came from those who believed speaking Japanese had impeded obtaining technical know-how, which can undermine their progress at work.

*"If I get the instructions in Chinese and I am not sure how to follow, I can go to ask my supervisor to show me. But the instructions are in Japanese. Not only did I have to translate and figure out what all the terms mean in my head, but if I check with the supervisors, they will be like 'haven't you learned all these in your class?'" (DK-26)*

In common with studies by authors such as Graham (1994) and Sharpe (2006), the training room was a site where shop-floor workers exhibited resistance through individual and spontaneous acts such as mocking the teachers, smudging the teaching materials, disrupting any signs of engagement of fellow trainees and vandalising facilities. Further, the training site became an *incubator*, where workers strategized *deliberative opposition* – mobilising scattered, spontaneous and latent protests to influence or change workplace practices so as to realign firm-based resources with the pursuit of social opportunities. Some workers called for increased pay for the two-hour language training. While individual negotiation with management failed, a group of workers started gathering evidence to end compulsory Japanese training. These workers sought legal resolution for compensation on the ground of unpaid overtime, and were supported through a local employment tribunal. After the tribunal, the plant reviewed the training programme, which was terminated later that year.

*Deliberative opposition* was also evident in the comparatively high level of turnover among the DK cohort. The average tenure among the DK cohort was less than 2 years. More importantly, the higher turnover was regardless of language skills workers developed, indicating that the more ‘attentive’ workers were not necessarily ‘engaging’ with the firm. Talking with some of the leavers outside the workplace, they suggested that attending language training was part of their ‘planning for exit’.

*“I decided to quit because I have nothing more to learn here. Knowing a bit of Japanese only takes you so far, and I need to get on with professional development.” (DK-15)*

Japanese language proficiency did not seem to be considered an advantage for job hunting locally. However, for a small number of local workers, the training programme provided an opportunity to learn a foreign language, which allowed them to pursue full-time adult education at universities offering undergraduate or postgraduate certificate programmes and accepting Japanese was a subject for entrance exams. This indicates that conflicting management-workers discourses of learning were *latent* in the training. In this sense, language acquisition is an exercise of power by different cohorts of workers, which is accomplished in a *deliberative* manner – in the sense of rational and purposeful action.

A disparate discourse of learning between management and workers underlined the life and death of the training programme. Building on an instrumental assumption of

learning, management presented language training as programmatic and neutral, so as to appeal to those starting work. Language learning was to pick-out and tie-in workers. However, the design or the delivery of the programme cannot explain the contrasting responses between the two cohorts. Nor were the attributes of the workers significantly different. They both joined shortly after graduating from vocational schools. They cannot be distinguished by their language proficiency at the time of completing the entry-level language training. What really signified the differences was that the two cohorts envisaged contrasting outcomes of language training in relation to the pathways of social progression within and beyond the firm. Cohort-based differences of workers' discourse of learning are informed by opportunities brought by societal transition and contextualised over time.

## **Discussion: explaining deliberative acquisition and deliberative opposition in language acquisition**

The findings above show that language acquisition is dynamic, contextual and evaluative. The same language training is received in different ways by the two cohorts, which highlights the role of context, and workers assessment of language training, as intermediate filters on action. Language in use at the plant is not a class gauge in a sociological sense (Bernstein 1971). The workers are from similar family background, at similar age when they joined the firm, and have received similar education. Workers choices are informed by the power and control given to language within the firm. Their orientation towards language in the reproduction of labour power is also informed by institutional changes outside the firm, which affect the prospectus of the returns of acquiring language in terms of social progression.

### ***Intra-firm pathway of status change***

The purpose or outcome of language acquisition is directly linked to intra-firm mobility. On the whole, the CK-cohort workers were in higher ranking jobs compared to the DK cohort. Language acquisition can affect access to power within the firm – a point echoed in previous research (San Antonio, 1987). By using Japanese for daily tasks, incorporating Japanese in appraisal procedures and interacting with non-Chinese speaking clients, workers with Japanese proficiency were given an advantageous position to achieve intra-firm progression.

This is because language proficiency allows privileged access to information and opportunities to socialise with senior management and the Japanese clients. What stands out from the cohort analysis is that the prospect for intra-firm progression dwindled for the DK-cohort and this undermined the association between language acquisition and intra-firm pathway for status change.

On average, the CK cohort moved up 0.4 grades every year whereas the DK cohort moved up 0.22 grades per year. While both cohorts shared the view that the training programme was at entry-level and completion of the training did not entitle job progression, the CK cohort often emphasised continuity in training and spoke of the linkage between training and intra-organisational progression:

*I think joining the training programme is important. It [Japanese language] is not the single factor that has decided my promotion, but a fairly critical one. (CK-02)*

Workers with Japanese proficiency from DK-cohort are not excluded from pay rises, promotion opportunities or managerial roles. New layers of seniority were created and additional managerial jobs were opened to the DK-cohort as the size of the workforce expanded. However, being appointed to those newly created internal positions were considered symbolic and hence not making 'real progression' in changing the workers' status.

*'Yes, you have a new title, you are paid a bit more, and you are applauded at the factory assembly for getting promoted. But you don't have authority. And, you don't have seniority either because you are not THE manager.' [DK-08]*

Among those who managed to move into a symbolic managerial post, some found themselves further isolated in the workplace. One of incidents during the fieldwork showed how a departmental executive [*Kachou* in Japanese] of administration was excluded by her fellow workers who mocked her, by not addressing her by her name, but rank, and embarrassing her for her lack of power:

*As I walked out the canteen with Wang-san, a group of workers caught up with us and surrounded her. 'Why haven't I got my name badge yet?' one of the workers asked. Wang-san looked a bit stunned and was not able to give a prompt response. 'Get it sorted, will you, now that you are a Kachou.' The worker gawked at Wang-san. 'Sure thing, Kachou,' echoed the other workers. 'I will chase this up,' replied Wang-san, recovering from the initial shock. 'What was that about?' I asked Wang-san as the group of workers started to walk away. 'Some sort of denunciation, I guess.' she*

*muttered. 'Did you used to work with her?' 'No, she was a schoolmate.' [Extracted from fieldwork notes]*

To workers promoted from the DK-cohort, 'exclusion' by their own generation of workers further undermined the sense of authority associated with the internal jobs. For the CK cohort, internal progression provided access to power. For the DK cohort, attrition in internal progression and restrained on-the-job authority created scepticism about the value of language acquisition.

### ***Pathways of social progression***

The two cohorts' pathway in social progression beyond the firm structure is equally significant in informing the tactics they took in language acquisition. For Chinese workers, the conventional route out of the 'ordinary worker' (*putong gongren*) status is to be selected as a member of the 'national cadre' (*guojia ganbu*) – a minority group on prestigious managerial and professional positions (approximately 7% of the total Chinese workforce), who are scrutinised, trained and mobilised by the state (Zhou, 2001). For the majority of the vocational school graduates from rural China, like the CK cohort in this case, the chance of being selected was slim. Opening up of the economy to foreign investors has effectively created an alternative route to becoming managers and professionals, independent from the state-controlled selection system. Due to the absence of management training in China until 1990s and the increasing demand for professional managers in foreign invested companies, those with multi-linguistic skills were in an advantageous position to secure managerial jobs and move up the career ladder through learning-by-doing alongside the expatriated managers.

*'Foreign languages were not in our curriculum and none of us know much about Japan or Japanese factories. We got the basics from our initial language training. But really, we just picked it [Japanese language] up at work. We had to communicate with the machinery suppliers, the head office, and our clients. To be honest, I was uneasy when I was promoted to head of this factory. But I thought to myself, if I can pick up a foreign language, I can pick up other things to do this job.'* (CK-02)

Against the backdrop of a state-sponsored developmental agenda, the CK cohort were able to exploit the firm-based training to advance into a new space for social progression, which had been denied to them due to their lack political resources or connections to those in power.

To the DK cohort, correlation between multi-linguistic skills and social status progression was less evident. They found themselves disadvantaged internally as managerial and professional positions were mostly taken by workers from the CK-cohort. Formalising Japanese as *the* working language and conducting performance appraisal in Japanese were seen as blocking their entry into senior positions:

*Their training and ours are different. Back then, the company genuinely wanted to train the locals to take up important roles. Now, all the important roles are taken. (DK-18)*

Workers' discontent was evident, particularly around the fact that the firm-organised training was 'insufficient for language proficiency needed for promotion' [DK-09], the 'lack of support for taking professional tests' [DK-01], and 'technical skills being underrated' [DK-06]. A sense of separation between training and social progression was reinforced by the depreciation of tradable value of firm-based training both in terms of an increase in pay and broadening job-seeking opportunities externally. Completing the entry-level training did not have a direct impact on workers' pay level. Only when workers managed to pass tests organised by an external exam board (e.g. Japanese Language Proficiency Test), was a skill allowance paid.

As the scope for internal job progression narrowed, an alternative was to seek external opportunities. Gaining basic Japanese skills through firm-organised training did enhance the potential external job opportunities, when there was an inflow of Japanese foreign direct investments (FDI) into manufacturing sectors in the nearby area and a short supply of Japanese speaking semi-skilled workers. Japanese-invested manufacturing plants increased by the rate of 20% each year between 1998 and 2004 (JETRO, 2010). Workers were often approached by the nearby factories and offered better compensation packages.

*'There is this saying that a tree moves to die but a person moves to live. You don't make this kind of decision [changing jobs] lightly because you don't know for sure that things will get better or you will make it to the top. But if you stay here, you are pretty much stuck.'* (DK-22)

Despite financial gains through making side-way moves, the DK cohort was more conscious of the squeezed value of multi-linguistic skills to secure managerial and professional jobs.



*'One of my friends works in an American company. They use more up-to-date machines and, my friend, he learns a lot and has just got a senior skilled-worker certificate. Do they care about whether you can speak English? Not at all!'*

*Deliberative opposition* among the DK-cohort demonstrates a clear transactional view on firm-organised training among the workers. To many of them, Japanese language, together with the values promoted by the firm, had low value in the development China experienced. Assessing the relevance of the content of their training, one employee from the DK cohort stated:

*'The reality is that the Japanese model is a bit out-of-date, talking about the factory as an egalitarian community. I mean, do you know any company where everyone somehow gets a bonus? And, the difference between the top rank of bonus and the bottom rank is only a couple thousand yuan? My friend works in an American company, and their top performers' earns tens of thousands more than those lag- behinds. This company has made changes recently to reward good performance, but there should be way bigger gaps, so that people will work harder.'* (DK-25)

The Chinese state have been pushing market reforms and attacking employment security. In this context, workers are rejecting practices found in Japanese firms that are reminiscent of older working practices adopted by the state owned enterprises. In other words the Chinese state is setting an institutional context where certain expectations of best practice can be constructed.

Expansion of vocational and higher education in China under the slogan '*knowledge changes fate*' has fuelled aspirations among those leaving their rural home to seek education in cities. Unlike those who moved directly from farming to working in factories, these workers often disassociate themselves with 'migrant-workers' or 'peasant-workers'. Moving between factories and increments in earnings did not bring the desirable path to change their life. The reality is that many of the workers have found themselves moving between jobs, living in dorms and seemingly missing opportunities. A sense of being 'excluded' from the nation-wide agenda of 'social progression' translated into discontent of arrested social mobility within and outside the firm. Language training, when detached from progression in social status, became 'worthless' and 'underpaid' [DK-17]. What followed were the collective and active actions formed among workers demanding the removal of training of 'obsolete' skills and replacing them with skills with higher external trading value.

### ***The decline of Japan as a source of perceived 'best practice'***

Second language acquisition within the MNC is a highly cultural and political asset. Workers' assessment of skill utility for their labour power in the market place and the firm gave rise to contrasting choices as illustrated above. Deliberative acquisition and deliberative opposition are rooted in how workers relate language learning with the social advancement of the Chinese society as a whole. Workers' assessments of language acquisition are related to the wider fate of Japan, and Japanese FDI in China as an emerging economy, and here workers and managers proffer sophisticated evaluations of what they judge as rising and falling models of work, informed through social networks, direct experience of working in China and Japan, and the ideology of wider state-sponsored developmental model of technological progression and best practice. Workers' choices of endorsing or rejecting language training at work are informed by the opportunities for social progression embedded in the social transition at the time when language acquisition took place. In the context of China's transitional economy, workers are learning in a more dynamic context.

Japanese language was legitimised by the ownership of the factory and perpetuated through the training programme. However, ownership-based legitimacy was challenged by workers' questioning of the parent firm's employment model as they compared the model to its alternatives:

*Chinese factories have to catch up with advanced technology and management. The parent plant [in Japan] is not necessarily the model to follow. I have been to the parent plant near Osaka twice. Once at the time this factory was set up, when I think I learned a lot. The second time was about two years ago. I was really disappointed. It was like being guided through an example of a sun-set industry. It was sad. If you ask me, we should be learning from what has been proved to be the best: the American, the Germans, or our Chinese competitors. Otherwise, you will be taking a much longer route and waste a lot of time. (CK-14)*

Workers filtered and internalised China's strengthening political economy against other countries. Infused with an economic and political agenda as a response to wider institutional changes, the collective action in opposing firm-organised language training were further espoused by expectations of 'best practices', which were build up through formal education, the mass media and stories told by workers in other factories.

Contrary to Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus, where languages are embodied within and thus inseparable from the individuals who have acquired them, we are suggesting a greater role for agency. Worker's perceptions of the value of language training are not fixed, as implied by theories reviewed, but contingent upon the perceived value of the training, set against missed opportunities for other training, the utility of Japanese in the internal and external labour markets and a more sophisticated assessment of the societal value of Japanese in Chinese society. This article argues that for one cohort (CK), the internal value of language training - relative to external opportunities and perceptions of risk in the society - was high, and this meant pursuing deliberative language acquisition. For the other cohort (DK) internal opportunities had diminished, external value of Japanese had also fallen, and therefore it made more sense to follow a deliberative opposition to the unpaid time taken in language training, and pursue social progress outside the firm. Importantly for this cohort, through direct experience and social connections, Japan was no-longer judged the provider of 'best practice' work and employment policies in China, having been challenged by rising indigenous companies and other foreign MNCs, such as American companies. This evaluation of internal language training through a sophisticated assessment of societal changes in China indicates the rational or deliberative nature of workers' actions in opposing further language learning.

## **Conclusion**

Following a labour process perspective, a disparate discourse of language learning is presented here: management discourse of language learning is instrumental, technical (based on an assumption that if it works for one group of workers, it will work for another group), and serving the purpose of preparing and retaining labour. Workers' discourse of language learning is transactional, contingent to societal transition and serving the purpose of social progression. This more transactional feature of workers' perspective on language learning is illustrated through deliberative acquisition and deliberative opposition. The dynamic evolution of the training programme described in this case study was linked to the structural issues - connected to both the nature of the employment relationship, and the socio-economic opportunities accessible to workers through language training. While the study agrees with the existing literature on the point that 'language' contains strong political meanings at workplace level, it further illustrates how contestation goes beyond the

acquisition of linguistic skills or resisting cultural dominance associated with language. The power struggle within the employment relationship could not be overcome by training without at the same time socio-economic opportunities being available for workers within the firm or beyond.

Cohort-based differences revealed the limitation of treating 'common language' as an 'integrating ingredient' when studying social relations in transnational workplaces, whether the issues were discussed from normative-managerial, critical-culturalist or a labour process perspectives. While language training was designed to emphasise shared management-employee interests, piloted among one cohort of the local workforce and achieving desirable outcomes, the promulgation of training across all local workers was distinguished by controversy and conflict. The local workforce, with enhanced language proficiency and 'cultural awareness', challenged the provision of the training programme as well as the corporate social values embedded in the programme. Embedding training within employment relations, the struggles were largely informed by the relative value of multi-linguistic skills at the time when training took place. Management's attempt to tie-in labour by making firm-based language skills a prerequisite for technical skill development and job progression had generated a pronounced cohort effect.

Cohort analysis has utility beyond China, but it may be more explicit within a transitional economy where major change is on-going. The choice of accepting or rejecting language training comes from cohort differences in the way workers relate themselves to the structural changes in the society and how reproduction of labour power is linked to changing social status opportunities among the workers. When MNCs move to developing countries, language can be part of a cultural hegemonic exchange, the company insisting on one dominant language to operate across the subsidiaries. This study demonstrates such broad definitions of culture to be analytically undeveloped, and as such aim to "explain too much but succeed in explaining too little" (Elger and Smith, 2005:24).

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## Note

1. See Table 1 for details about the demographic profile of the workforce.

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**Table 1 Demographic Profile of the Workforce**

Total Workforce (1, 561)		CK-cohort (27%)	DK-cohort (72%)
Years of Joining		1994-2000	2000-2007
Gender*	Male	67%	44%
	Female	33%	56%
Average age		32	24
Average tenure**		10.5 years	2 years
Annual turnover		5%	25%
Age distribution at 2007 (% of the workforce in the same age group)	Under 20	0 (0%)	497 (100%)
	20-30	126 (20%)	515 (80%)
	30-40	223 (77%)	66 (23%)
	40 above	78 (58%)	56 (42%)
Residential status	Urban residence	15%	10%
	Migrants	80%	80%



	from within the province		
	Migrants from outside the province	5%	10%
Accommodation***	Dormitory	15%	95%
	Non-dormitory	85%	5%
Education	Vocational School	85%	70%
	University degree	13%	30%
	Postgraduate	2%	--

\* There is a gender division of labour in different production processes. The female workers mainly worked in the weaving process and the male workers in the dyeing process. Production expansion in the weaving sections meant that more female workers joined the company after 2000.

\*\* The average tenure of the CK-cohort is a distorted figure because the researcher was not able to trace the tenure of workers who left the company before the fieldwork started. In addition, annual turnover (which is reported by the HR manager of the plant) among the existing workers of both cohorts is used as a supplementary figure to show the relative stability among the CK-cohort.

\*\*\* The marital status of the whole workforce was not updated regularly and the researcher was not able to obtain an accurate figure. Among the workers interviewed who were willing to reveal their marital status, the majority (95%) of the CK-cohort was married or had been married. The DK-cohort workers were mainly single (70%). Given the age gap between the CK-cohort and the DK-cohort, the difference in marital status is in line with the social norms in China. As an alternative way of examining marital status, accommodation of the workers is used to show their social ties with the firm. The CK-cohort was provided with dormitory accommodation at the time when they joined the plant. They move out the dorms as they started their own family or their parents joined them.

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