

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Treaty-Port English in Nineteenth-Century Shanghai: Speakers, Voices, and Images

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Abstract

This article examines the introduction of English to the treaty port of Shanghai and the speech communities that developed there as a result. English became a sociocultural phenomenon rather than an academic subject when it entered Shanghai in the 1840s, gradually generating various social activities of local Chinese people who lived in the treaty port. Ordinary people picked up a rudimentary knowledge of English along trading streets and through glossary references, and went to private schools to improve their linguistic skills. They used English to communicate with foreigners and as a means to explore a foreign presence dominated by Western material culture. Although those who learned English gained small-scale social mobility in the late nineteenth century, the images of English-speaking Chinese were repeatedly criticized by the literati and official scholars. This paper explores Westerners' travel accounts, as well as various sources written by the new elite Chinese, including official records and vernacular poems, to demonstrate how English language acquisition brought changes to local people's daily lives. I argue that treaty-port English in nineteenth-century Shanghai was not only a linguistic medium but, more importantly, a cultural agent of urban transformation. It gradually molded a new linguistic landscape, which at the same time contributed to the shaping of modern Shanghai culture.

Introduction

The circulation of Western languages through both textual and oral media has enormously affected Chinese society over the past two hundred years. In nineteenth-century China, the English language gradually found a social niche and influenced people's acceptance of emerging

ideas and technologies. Following contact with the West, a period of language transformation affected the social life of the Chinese, particularly along the coast and in big inland cities. The interaction between history, language, and culture resulting from language contact deserves in-depth investigation.

This paper examines the introduction of English to the treaty port of Shanghai and the speech communities that developed there from the 1840s to the early twentieth century. Chinese scholars—as well as Western traders, travelers, and news reporters—witnessed the entry of English into ordinary people’s daily lives. According to their descriptions, Chinese compradors, interpreters, office boys, rickshaw coolies, shopkeepers, prostitutes, beggars, servants, and others spoke some English. However, as sojourners and storytellers, these writers were able to experience only part of the transition, and each was limited to his own viewpoint. In other words, no single author’s account comprehensively depicts the introduction of English to Shanghai.

Although such historical voices appear sporadically, they provide the basic narratives from which my reconstruction of the early history of English in Shanghai begins. In this paper, I consider English not only as a linguistic medium but, more importantly, as an agent of cultural change. The influence of English and the response of native people thus constituted a new linguistic landscape in late nineteenth-century Shanghai, one in which linguistic contact both shaped and informed growing interaction with the Western world. The *yangjingbang* words (vernacular expressions in pidgin English) that arose during this time remain alive in the Shanghai dialect today, reflecting the lengthy history of cultural mixing in a semicolonial society.

Previous scholarship on language contact in nineteenth-century China has taken English as a purely linguistic subject, failing to examine the social repercussions of its introduction.¹ However, recent research on English in a variety of Chinese contexts reveals the positive influence of a foreign language on the local culture. To take a few examples, Kingsley Bolton, in his book *Chinese Englishes*, conducts sociolinguistic research on the description and analysis of English in Hong Kong and China, showing that contemporary Hong Kong English has its

historical roots in Chinese pidgin English. He uses the plural *Englishes* to indicate the “localized varieties of English” across Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean (Bolton 2003, 1–3). Dealing with languages in contact across the Pacific, Mae Ngai’s recent article regards translation in pidgin English not only as a linguistic skill of Chinese interpreters in the United States but also as “a social relation and as an entrepreneurial strategy of ethnic middle-class formation” (Ngai 2011, 23–24). Shuang Shen’s study of Anglophone print culture in Shanghai focuses on English-language magazines edited by Western-educated Chinese in the 1920s and the translation of English as a new form of translanguaging practice among cosmopolitan individuals (Shen 2009, 25–28). Where Shen focuses on the literary practices of elites, my study looks at the dissemination of English among non-elite and ordinary Chinese. My research on English in the treaty port of Shanghai, another of the many types of “Asian Englishes,” reveals the language’s identity as it is embedded in the social transitions of a semicolonial history. The majority of English-speaking Chinese in Shanghai were common people, and the English language that they spoke was Chinese pidgin English, two facts often overlooked by sociolinguists and historians. Therefore, by exploring how English influenced local Chinese mindsets and how English-speaking Chinese adopted the English language through their social activities, this paper reveals how languages in contact shaped ordinary people’s daily lives. For a better understanding of the early history of English in Shanghai, let us begin by tracing who the speakers were and where they lived.

Pioneering Speakers as *Interpreters*

Shanghai, previously a small county, began to exhibit different cultural qualities after its opening as an international trading port in 1843. Domestic trade and travel engendered greater diversity in Shanghai’s population. Records reveal the economic power of guest merchants in Shanghai, showing that, as of the early nineteenth century, more than twenty-six merchant guilds, including *gongsuo* (commercial or craft associations) and *huiguan* (native-place associations), existed in Shanghai County (Du 1983, 6–9). Merchant guilds played a significant

role in the emergence of Shanghai as a flourishing market town in the Jiangnan region (Johnson 1995, 122–154), and merchants of different origins usually entered different commercial or native-place associations and dominated different businesses.

After Shanghai's opening as a treaty port in 1843, English began to emerge among the merchant groups as a trading jargon used between local Chinese and foreigners. In historical Chinese documents, *yangjingbang* was the name given to the Chinese pidgin English spoken by many locals from the 1840s to the 1940s. This particular language reveals the early history of English in Shanghai after the city's opening as a treaty port.² One local Shanghainese noted that “*yangjingbang* is a sort of special speech neither Chinese nor Western, whose fame is known by all the people in Shanghai” (Yao [1917] 1989). The corresponding term in English for *yangjingbang* is “pidgin.” However, this is not its meaning in Chinese. Yangjing Bang³ was a main branch of the Huangpu River, which was located north of the old walled city, between the British settlement and the French concession. Since the area around Yangjing Bang became especially prosperous in commercial trade during the 1850s and 1860s, the name Yangjing Bang came to refer not only to the stream itself but more generally to a place where many foreign businesses were located. “Yangjing Bang is the hub of Western trading,” according to Wang Tao (1828-1897), “an exciting world to wander about,” in which so many walkers and carriages pass by that “shoulders rub and wheel hubs bump against one another” (Wang [1875] 1989).⁴ Because the *tongshi* (interpreters or linguists) around the Yangjing Bang area were the first to speak English, as middlemen between Chinese merchants and foreigners, the pidgin English that they spoke was also called *yangjingbang*.

These interpreters, known specifically as *lutian tongshi* (“open-air” linguists), originally came from Guangdong (Goodman 1995, 60–62). The pidgin English that they spoke can be traced back to “Canton jargon,” a trading jargon composed of a mixture of English, Cantonese, Portuguese, and Hindi used by Cantonese merchants to communicate with foreigners during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Williams 1836, 428–435). After the opening of the

treaty ports in the 1840s, Cantonese merchants, workers, and adventurers traveled to Shanghai to explore trading opportunities, bringing their trading jargon with them to the north. Yao Gonghe, a gentry scholar who traveled to Shanghai in the early 1900s⁵, transcribed a story he heard about this trading jargon:

The *yangjingbang* language takes the phonetic part of English, yet borrows the grammar of Chinese. According to tradition, thirty-six people called *lutian tongshi* (“open-air” linguists) took mastery of this language as their job. . . . Seeing foreign sailors and traders who had just arrived in Shanghai purchasing food, these *lutian tongshi* wanted to act as guides for them, and thus to profit from the process. (Yao [1917] 1989)

Shanghai *zhuzhici* (vernacular poems) testified that the post of *lutian tongshi* was conventionally limited to only thirty-six people, and that “no one [could] be added unless somebody [died] among the quota” (Yang 1873). Yao Gonghe also noted that *lutian tongshi* was an exclusive group: “‘Open-air’ linguists are famous for being rogues in Shanghai. . . . In fact, they are like a secret union of bandits” (Yao [1917] 1989). However, thirty-six here may be a purely arbitrary number demonstrating that only a small number of “experts” could make a big profit in this occupation. *Lutian tongshi* relied on oral interpretation to earn a living; therefore, they were loath to allow their business to be stolen by adding extra interpreters.

The 1845 Land Regulation (*Shanghai tudi zhangcheng*) segregated foreigners, who lived in the settlements, from the majority of Chinese, who were required to remain in the old walled city. Therefore, few Chinese came into contact with foreigners before the early 1850s, because they were not allowed to live in the settlements. Only those considered vagrants were able to do some small trading business with foreigners in the 1840s, and they were mainly from Guangdong. Due to this fact, few local groups could compete with those “open-air” linguists to make a living by speaking *yangjingbang* English. Surprisingly, documents of the time reveal no positive comments on the language ability of English-speaking Chinese. On the contrary, most

gentry scholars like Yao Gonghe viewed English speaking as a trick used by local sellers to defraud foreign buyers. Wang Tao witnessed such a situation when he was in Shanghai in the early 1850s: “Shanghai is filled with various merchandise. The trade between Chinese and foreigners is based on the words of linguists alone, and half of the linguists are of Cantonese origin. In a moment, a lot of money can be obtained with one’s bare hands” (Wang [1875] 1989).

Ge Yuanxu claimed that *lutian tongshi* were known as “open-air” linguists because “their clothes often reveal their elbows, and they have neither homes nor families” (Ge [1876] 1989). In addition, their title indicates that these interpreters have no fixed place for an office (Yi’an zhuren [1906] 1996), so they usually “express ideas for foreign traders along the street.” Ge Yuanxu noted that *lutian tongshi* first “waited along the Bund and kept watch (for foreigners).” After spotting a potential client, they would “follow him and point the way for him.” When they “encountered a business deal, they would discuss the price with both sides and profit from being a middleman.”

Documents show that these thirty-six “open-air” linguists from Guangdong soon lost dominance and that more people spoke English for business purposes starting in the 1850s. After the Qing government quelled the Small Sword Uprising in 1855,⁶ numerous local residents and refugees from southern and central China entered the British settlement in Shanghai, stimulating the trading market and causing the city’s first real estate boom (Hauser 1940, 54–62). Ernest Hauser explains, “It was the end of aristocratic Shanghai and the birth of the fastest town on earth. . . . Money had been borrowed, quick profits had been realized” (1940, 54). Some Chinese opened up cheaply constructed stores, while others sought employment at mercantile firms. As a blooming trading port, Shanghai attracted immense foreign investment during the 1850s and 1860s. In Hauser’s words, “A new spirit of enterprise took hold of *taipans*, as the foreign ships came back to the piers of Shanghai to unload and load” (1940, 55). Hauser describes the emergence of new branches of foreign firms in this “*taipan* trade.”⁷ In 1847, there were only thirty-nine foreign firms in Shanghai. By the end of 1867, about two hundred new firms had been

established, most of which were run by the British (*The North-China Desk Hong List* 1904, 424–451).

Each firm required a few Chinese interpreters to help foreigners arrange both business affairs and daily needs. As a result, the majority of English-speaking Chinese turned from vagrant linguists into people with legitimate occupations. Among those who served as oral interpreters, compradors held the most prestigious position for their knowledge of the tea and silk business. Most 1850s Shanghai compradors were Cantonese experts in the tea business who had followed the firms to Shanghai. After the 1850s almost every comprador had to be “secured,” or financially guaranteed, due to the traditional Chinese financial system (Hao 1970, 50–51). Cantonese merchants, therefore, financially guaranteed their fellow townsmen as compradors, which resulted in the supremacy of Cantonese compradors in Shanghai foreign firms before the 1870s. Like the *lutian tongshi*, Cantonese compradors brought their trading jargon, which formed the linguistic substrata of the *yangjingbang* language, to Shanghai.

Starting in the 1860s, a few Zhejiang merchants (mostly from Ningbo) also competed to be compradors because their expertise in the silk business and foreign banking suited the demands of the contemporary Sino-Western trade. Wang Huaishan was the first comprador for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation in 1865, and Yang Fang became the first Ningbo comprador of Jardine, Matheson & Co. (Li Jian 2000, 51–52). One source mentions that Mu Bingyuan, a Ningbo merchant who knew English and managed business well, recruited a few fellow townsmen and taught them English. Then he introduced them to the business job market, allowing a few foreign firms to hire new compradors (Yao [1917] 1989).

Research indicates that Chinese-English glossaries primarily facilitated the distribution of English to a wider range of local Chinese people. For example, Zhou Zhenhe’s study of an English wordbook entitled *Yinghua zhujie* (English conversation with explanatory notes) suggests that glossaries with phonetic annotations in the Ningbo dialect were in great demand because more people from Ningbo were engaged in the trading business starting in the 1860s

(Zhou 1998, 111–127). Published by means of a funding pool shared by five Ningbo businessmen, the book aimed to promote the convenience of trading with foreigners, “particularly in order to enlighten younger scholars in our town” (Zheng 1860). The publishers’ effort to put English phonetics into writing using Chinese characters, and to further spread knowledge among their fellow townsmen, constituted a major step in the social history of English in nineteenth-century Shanghai. For the first time that we know of, local residents valued English as something they could use to profit financially and to improve their social status.

A further examination of the glossary books may provide us with a glimpse into how early Shanghainese interpreters picked up pidgin English through textual materials. Merchants from Canton and from Ningbo tended to use different texts simply because they needed to annotate English words and phrases using their respective dialects in Chinese. Cantonese glossary books appeared even earlier than Ningbo ones and were more rudimentary in content. However, compilations in both dialects listed words and phrases by categories related to normal business transactions. The wordbook entitled *Hongmao tongyong fanhua* (The common foreign language of the red-haired people), which prevailed among Cantonese merchants around the early nineteenth century, contained only sixteen pages and four different categories: “business numbers,” “people,” “common words,” and “food and groceries” (Bolton 2003, 266–274). The Ningbo *Yinghua zhujie*, by contrast, is ninety pages long with content related mostly to trading terms, including food, plants, numbers, metal, weights, currency (Chinese silver *taels* and foreign money), measurements, taxes, and import-export goods. Within these basic categories, the compiler came up with his own classification of the Chinese vocabulary, arranging phrases of daily use into categories of “two, three, four, and five characters” to facilitate easy memorization. For example, the Chinese words for contract (*hetong*), signboard (*zhaopai*), and regulations (*zhangcheng*) are all two characters; therefore, these words are put together in the same category. Finally, the category of “long sentences” in *Yinghua zhujie* provides learners with simple conversations, although their sentence explanations are mostly written in broken English. For

example, the question *Ni congqian zuo shenme shengyi?* (What business did you do before?) is written in pidgin English as “You before to do what business,” and wishing someone good luck, *Ni jinlai shenhao yunqi*, is written as “You just now very good chance” (see figure 1). Numerous sentence examples show that English verbs were of less importance in the linguistic register of early English-speaking Chinese, and that Chinese merchants were capable of communicating with foreigners at a minimal level by memorizing a certain number of key words and phrases (usually names of commercial articles and phrases such as *just now*, *what price*, and so on). Conversation models shown in the glossaries not only indicated voices of the “pioneering speakers” in mid-nineteenth-century Shanghai but also revealed the pragmatic value of learning pidgin English in treaty-port linguistic communication.

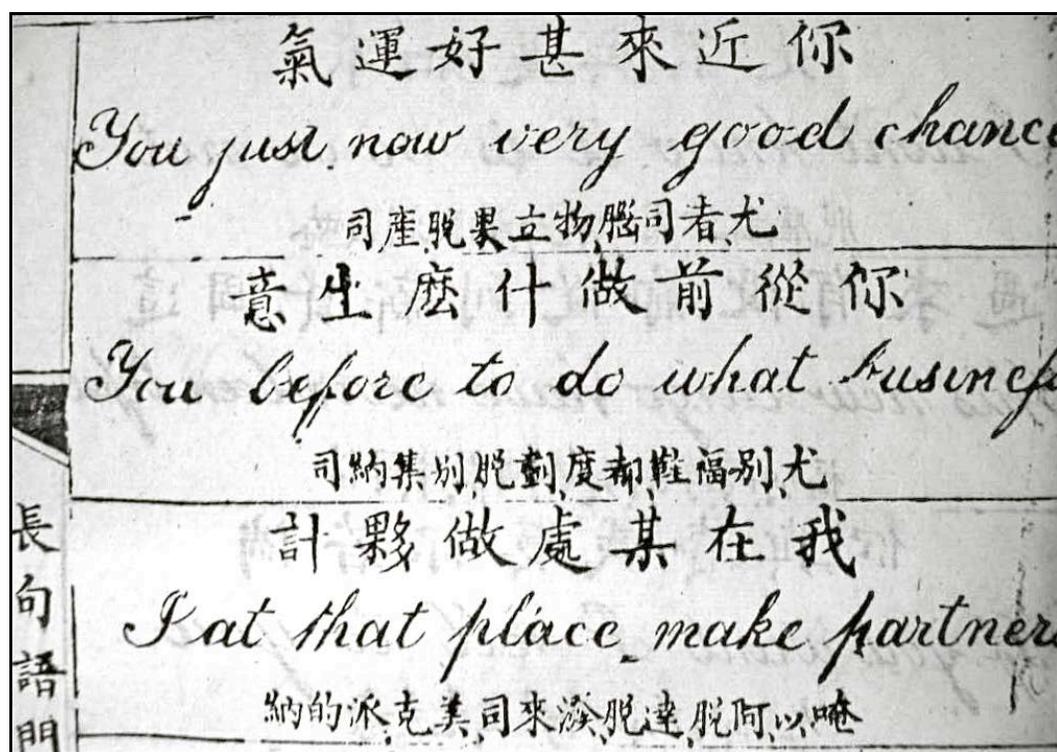


Figure 1. The category of “long sentences” in pidgin English, in *Yinghua zhujie* (Zheng 1860).

Peak in the 1880s: Students from Private Schools

Starting in the 1860s, English manifested itself not only through glossaries for self-

instruction, but also in school curricula. In Shanghai, the foreign-language institute Guangfangyan Guan (School for the Diffusion of Languages), where talented local boys under fourteen were selected to study English or French, was set up in 1864. The number of students varied from year to year, from fewer than thirty at first to as many as eighty. Spelling, grammar, conversation, and translation were all required fields in the study of English. The instructors were Protestant missionaries in Shanghai, philologists from abroad, and graduates of Guangfangyan Guan itself. Besides foreign languages (English or French), the school also offered courses in classical Chinese, Chinese history, mathematics, and astronomy (Biggerstaff 1961; Xiong 1989). Between 1844 and 1896, Guangfangyan Guan graduated around five hundred students, most of whom later became diplomats, translators, or key members of the government (Xiong 1989, 193–196, 205–209).

The students enrolled by the official language institute were those with prospects to be official diplomatic translators. Those who wished to learn English for trading purposes attended private schools, such as the Anglo-Chinese School, a famous school run by missionaries.⁸ John Fryer, as the first head of the Angle-Chinese School in 1865, described the situation of Chinese students learning English: “It is perhaps a matter of surprise that there are already ten scholars under instruction and at least as many more who have been promised to the school by their friends. These lads are without exception the sons of wealthy and respectable Chinese⁹—such as bankers, compradors, and merchants,” and “their average age is 13 1/2 years” (Fryer 1865). In 1867, Fryer reported that thirty-five students were so far entered in the admission book and pointed out that the students were “chiefly sons of respectable if not wealthy Chinese who have settled in Shanghai for purposes of trade” (Fryer 1867).

Of the thirty-five students, eighteen were from Guangdong Province, six were from Ningbo, and five were from Suzhou. The student body reflected the geographical balance of money and power as foreign trade boomed. In Shanghai during the 1860s, Cantonese merchants and compradors continued to dominate the trade in foreign firms after they moved to the north.

At the same time, people from Ningbo and Suzhou in Shanghai started to develop their business in tea, silk, sugar, and modern banking with foreigners (Jones 1974).

Students in the Anglo-Chinese School studied both English and Chinese. Fryer noticed that students were unable to make progress in both languages simultaneously. Chinese classical learning was designed for the civil service examinations and was thus not suitable for mercantile pursuits. Hence, Fryer said, “the course of study of Chinese pursued in the school is necessarily confined to the more elementary subjects, . . . [such as] forms for letters and general correspondence, and the composition of essays on easy subjects” (Fryer 1867). Fryer also described the daily routine of English study in his report. A four-hour lesson plan was designed, yet it was meant to be modified according to students’ different levels. The first hour “is occupied in a vigorous examination both oral and written on previous lessons which have been revised by the pupils at home.” During the second hour, “a lesson consisting of twenty new words is learnt and each word explained” (Fryer 1865). The third and fourth hours were usually scheduled for writing and arithmetic classes. English, although useful for merchant families in Shanghai, was considered merely a practical instrument in their business. Therefore, in Fryer’s class, few students ended up with the ability to do literary translation.

Early graduates from private English schools entered the newly established foreign firms in Shanghai as employed clerks and soon formed a special group engaged in treaty-port commerce. As immigrants (mostly from Canton and Ningbo) who commanded a certain level of literacy in both English and Chinese, their social positions were enhanced and turned out to be much higher than those of the pidgin-speaking linguists. Vernacular bamboo rhymes described “open-air” linguists as poor rogues, but their English-school-educated counterparts were refined and prudent youth (Yi’an zhuren [1906] 1996). Office clerks in foreign firms employed English as a practical linguistic skill to communicate with their Anglo-American bosses, and documents show that they enjoyed the prestige of bilingualism. “Open-air” linguists did not have regular incomes, but clerks in foreign firms were paid monthly. Sources suggest that the salary was not

high at all, yet the amount was certainly enough to cover their daily expenses (Ge [1876] 1989). The clothes worn by those clerks were “clean with white short sleeves,” and, “if sometimes they were bestowed special favors by their boss, they could be given a better position” (Yi’an zhuren [1906] 1996). In Chinese documents, office clerks were usually referred to as *xizai* (“young boys” in vernacular Cantonese), later written as *xi zai* boys in foreign firms), specifying that these boys were employees for Westerners (Ge [1876] 1989). One source indicates that a major group of *xi zai* had attended free missionary schools (Li Hongzhang 1863).¹⁰

Moreover, a command over more formal English became necessary since these clerks needed to fill out customs declaration forms or to translate business correspondence. Chinese-English glossary books, therefore, played a significant role in the commercial life of office clerks. Compared to early glossaries composed in pidgin, those compiled during the 1870s started to emphasize the importance of pronunciation, spelling, and linguistic standardization. They complied with the needs of private school graduates who had obtained a limited level of literacy and desired to improve their English. Cao Xiang, a local Shanghai literatus who had observed the connection between the learning of English and the development of Sino-Western trading after the Opium War, compiled a glossary book entitled *Ying zi rumen* (An elementary course in English words) in 1874. In the preface, Yang emphasized that letters and words (*ying zi*) were key to mastering English and communicating smoothly with Westerners. In his compilation, English words were listed according to the number of letters they contained. For example, words such as *for*, *nor*, *got*, *lot*, *bow*, and *cow* were grouped together in Lesson 24, “Spelling Key for Three-letter Words.” This enabled Chinese to store words of similar spelling in memory. Phrases and sentences consisting of a certain number of words came next—“an old man,” “a new fan,” “I can run,” and “I cannot hop,” for instance, were listed as “three-word combination” in Lesson 31 (Cao 1874, 21–24). Although phonetic annotations of English words were described in Shanghai dialect and written in Chinese, pidgin expressions no longer appeared in Cao Xiang’s glossary, which was targeted at commercial students who studied English to obtain jobs at foreign firms. It

was also Cao Xiang who first wrote down the phonetics of English in the local Shanghai dialect.

Trade made teaching English profitable, and the newly emergent extension classes were especially profitable. Beginning in 1873, advertisements written in Chinese for private English lessons started to appear in the newspaper *Shenbao* (Shanghai times). Since the readership of this newspaper was primarily new urban immigrants who wished to work in foreign firms, information published therein played a guiding role for young clerks' career plans. In almost every issue one or two advertisements for such classes appeared, and the advertisements were posted for anywhere from a week to a couple of months. In total, twenty-five different classes existed in the 1870s, some of which included daytime sections while others were taught exclusively in the evening. The years 1873 and 1875 were the peak: eight classes were offered in 1873, and seven in 1875 (Xiong 1999 6:297–298). Ge Yuanxu commented:

When foreign trade started in Shanghai, no one knew English except for linguists. Recently, in each firm and each warehouse there is one person able to speak English. This is because in recent years certain places to learn the English language have been established. Everyone who enters will learn and speak for about two hours a day, and need not pay a lot for monthly tuition. It takes smart youths only half a year to thoroughly understand. (Ge [1876] 1989)

Most of the English-language instructors were Western sojourners in Shanghai. Chinese teachers taught classes on Western learning, such as mathematics, geography, and astronomy (*Shenbao*, December 4, 1873, and July 6, 1875). In addition, courses featuring practical knowledge for trading purposes were also offered. For example, the private foreign-language school Maikai claimed in its advertisement that “about writing customs declarations, bills of lading, bills of storing, etc., all we can specifically teach you the fast way of Westerners (*Shenbao*, March 5, 1875). Most of these private schools focused on English study, but several combined English instruction with Chinese classical learning. For example, Ying-Hua Shuguan (English-Chinese School), which opened in 1875, permitted students to “either major in Western

learning, or Chinese learning, or both at the same time” (*Shenbao*, February 7, 1876).

In the 1880s, enrollment at the Anglo-Chinese School grew. A great number of students who wished to participate in foreign trade or international affairs were attracted by its prestige. In 1882, the school advertised in *Shenbao* that “last year many people wished to come and study here, but since there were few instructors, they could not teach them all. Thus a lot of students still need our reply. Now there is a new teacher from England. Whoever wishes to study can still come, and will definitely be received” (*Shenbao*, April 8, 1882).

Other advertisements emphasized the growing importance of English and listed various curricula related to trade. One 1880 advertisement reads, “Our school will specifically teach Chinese students to write English, and students will be well prepared to become compradors, translators, and scribes for foreign merchants” (*Shenbao*, January 1, 1880). Most schools offered mathematics and accounting in addition to English. One accounting school, located north of the Suzhou River, taught students “how to manage foreign accounts, as well as drawing and others” (*Shenbao*, September 22, 1881). The private school Ruiji in the 1880s was actually multifunctional: in the daytime it was a place for translating, where a Chinese teacher who knew English translated documents for clients; and from seven to ten at night, the teacher lectured on English, mathematics, geography, and drawing (*Shenbao*, March 30, 1882). Tuition for evening classes varied from two to three *taels* a month, for two and a half or three hours each night. Daytime classes usually cost four or five *taels* a month, and were held every day from nine in the morning to noon, and one to four in the afternoon.

The technique of lithographic printing also contributed to the expansion of English study among ordinary Chinese. Obviously, the increasing number of private English schools and evening classes in Shanghai required widespread availability of language reference books. However, if books had not been low in price, it would have been difficult for students to purchase them: a several-dollar block-printed or letterpress-printed dictionary would have equaled the monthly tuition at most English schools. Ordinary people could never have afforded

such pricey reference books. Fortunately, lithographic versions made it possible for students to acquire these texts. Starting in the 1880s, lithographic-reprinted books prevailed in the market of English-language study. An advertisement that appeared regularly in *Shenbao* from January to April 1881 informed “those who are learning the English language” that “the publisher of *Shenbao* has now produced various books on translation between Chinese and English in lithographic versions, including *Ying zi rumen*, *Wuche yun fu*, etc.”¹¹ The cost of the listed books varied from fifteen to eighty cents, which was relatively affordable for the local populace if we refer to the Shanghai pricelists at the time (*The North-China Desk Hong List* 1904).

Given the availability and affordability of English reference books, we can infer that English entered schools as well as ordinary people’s daily lives toward the late nineteenth century. One famous vernacular poem says: “All over Shanghai there are English schools and evening classes / to help people succeed in communicating with foreign traders” (Zhu [1909] 1996). What mattered to students was not that they were learning standard English, but that they could use it practically. Commercial English no doubt comprised the bulk of curricula offered by the aforementioned schools. To give an example, Kwong Ki-chiu’s “English series,” once used in these schools, placed special emphasis on commercial learning. Among Kwong’s many works, the one entitled *Manual of Correspondence and Social Usages* (1885) displayed the most sophisticated classification of commercial activities in late nineteenth-century Shanghai. It also instructed readers on how to incorporate English into their business and social life by providing numerous examples for them to follow.

It is not clear exactly when Chinese shopkeepers started to write English on signboards and advertisements. However, one section in Kwong’s *Manual* indicates that making a clear and eye-catching signboard in English was already an art for Chinese merchants to study by the 1880s: “The principle point to be regarded in the lettering of signs is correct punctuation. The want of accuracy in the use of commas, periods, and apostrophes sometimes produces ludicrous results.” The author went on to describe the key points requiring special attention at the very

beginning (figure 2). The whole section exhibits various ways to design a proper sign, and gives examples of signs for offices, rooms, stores, and so on as references.

INSCRIPTIONS FOR SIGNS.	
BUSINESS SIGNS.	
貿易招牌格式	
The principal point to be regarded in the lettering of signs is correct punctuation. The want of accuracy in the use of commas, periods, and apostrophes sometimes produces ludicrous results. The same rules of punctuation apply as in ordinary writing. The following specimen forms are given as guides.	
OFFICE.	Mrs. BENSON, <i>Millinery and Fancy Goods.</i>
EDITOR'S ROOM.	
SUPT'S OFFICE.	HARRIS & SNOW, Dealers in
LADIES' PARLOUR.	HATS, CAPS, FURS, ETC.
SECRETARY OF STATE'S OFFICE.	RAILWAY SUPPLIES.
DR. BROWN.	C. HOYT & SON.

Figure 2. "Inscription for Signs" in Kwong Ki-chiu's *Manual of Correspondence and Social Usages* (Kwong 1885).

The writing of appropriate English correspondence for commercial purposes was another area requiring special training related to the idea of "pragmatism" in Kwong's *Manual*. The book covered instructions and examples of all types of letters—most importantly business letters and invitation cards. The author further sorted letter writing into five categories: suitable forms and expressions, congratulations, condolences, recommendations, and letters of excuse or apology. These contents shed light on the capability of local Chinese to use English to support their trading businesses, and also showed that English was already a sophisticated subject of learning for people who were involved in foreign transactions in late nineteenth-century Shanghai. Figure 3 is an example from the book that demonstrates how to postpone financial payments to a business partner in a subtle way (figure 3). The corresponding Chinese written in the lower part,

particularly in its generic use of *moumou* (Mr. So-and-so) to address the recipient, shows that it is purely used for copy-reference, if one encounters the similar situation.

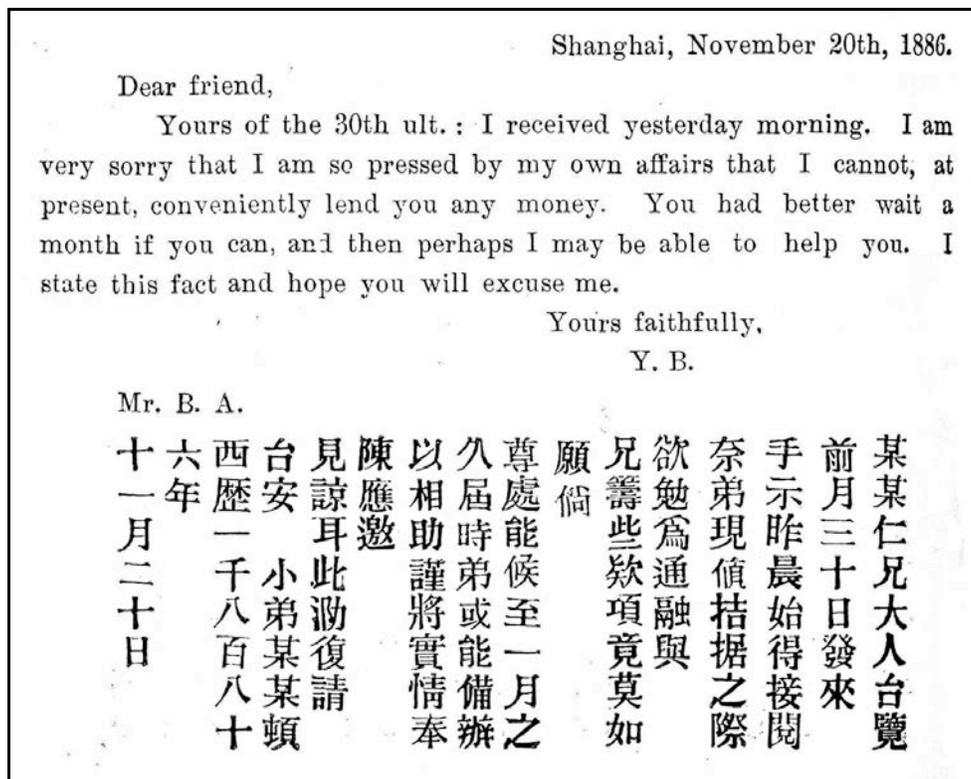


Figure 3. A sample of a commercial letter in Kwong Ki-chiu's *Manual* (Kwong 1885).

Speakers and Storytellers: Images of English-Speaking Chinese

The opening of private English schools as well as the widespread publication of lithographed texts set in motion a dynamic process that facilitated the social effectiveness of English teaching and learning in Shanghai during the second half of the nineteenth century. However, few scholars have noted the importance of these developments.¹² Traditional research on foreign-language schools in China emphasizes the contribution that English education made to literati's familiarity with Western knowledge, but fails to observe the social implications of the intellectual and political developments of this period, particularly the nongovernmental aspects. The spread of English among private school students, foreign firm interpreters

(including compradors, clerks, and accountants), and other English-speaking Chinese went beyond the influence of official language institutes. As we know, Shanghai Guangfangyan Guan and other language schools under the imperial government mainly trained future diplomats and translators for the needs of politics and technology. Private English schools and English reference books for self-learning had a far greater impact on the social life of the people in general. However, most historical accounts of the time were silent on these matters. As mentioned above, only a few newspapers published advertisements on the opening of private schools. Detailed information on the size of the classes, the actual administration of the schools, and what happened to them later is sorely lacking.

The reason for this neglect is related to the social identity of the students. Students who graduated from short-term private schools were mainly engaged in the trading business. Compradors and office clerks were considered “marginal men” in treaty ports. They could make money, but it was out of the question for them to obtain a rank in the bureaucratic system as students from official language schools did. Therefore, a clear social division existed between these two groups of students. From the viewpoint of the literati and scholars, only official language students shared the responsibilities of nation strengthening, while compradors, interpreters, and students from the merchant class merely served themselves by learning foreign languages.

Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), one of the most distinguished official scholars of the late Qing period, viewed interpretation as a special profession beyond the traditional job category. In his memorial proposing the establishment of official language institutes in 1863, Li stated: “We have discovered that the group of interpreters in Shanghai made the biggest profits, and they have already become a professional class, beyond [the four traditional categories of] functionaries, farmers, artisans, or traders.” Because Li Hongzhang at the time was eager to persuade the Qing government to prepare official language students for international diplomatic affairs, “Shanghai interpreters” under his pen served merely as objects of reference whose

foreign-language ability was disparaged. Without real contact with the interpreters, Li described that “only eight or nine out of ten are able to master the foreign speech and one or two out of ten can read. The foreign words that they know are no more than names of commodities, marked prices, and simple expressions.” In Li Hongzhang’s opinion, the English that the interpreters acquired was inadequate for them to become translators (Li Hongzhang 1863). Interpreters and translators in Li’s mind were associated with two different posts, so their English served two separate clienteles.

Furthermore, Li’s comments suggest that he considered the ability to read and translate the essence of foreign-language study, which could be subsumed under the “new learning” designed for the Self-Strengthening Movement of the 1860s to 1890s.¹³ In the traditional Confucian framework of book culture, literacy is greatly valued insofar as it defines one’s social prestige. Lacking adequate literacy and hence incapable of translating Western learning, compradors and students who studied in private schools were disdained, for their English was merely a tool for earning money. In fact, interpreters faced criticism not only from official scholars, but also from literati and those who graduated from official language schools. Yang Xun, who received formal English education and was an early graduate of Guangfanyan Guan, wrote a long article in *Shenbao* satirizing the oral form of Chinese pidgin English (Yang 1873). This account led to Yang’s endeavors in 1879 to compile a six-volume English-Chinese glossary book entitled *Ying zi zhinan* (A guide to English words), in which he intended to emphasize standard English learning and to separate two concepts in English study: *yu* (the spoken language) and *zi* (the written word).

Huang Shiquan, a scholar who penned for *Shenbao*, also wrote: “For the past twenty years, almost all people have belonged to one family. Chinese businessmen have learned a glimmer of ‘barbarian speech.’ Some of them who have been to English schools only need to pay two or three *taels* a month. After studying for more than one year, they are able to respond and converse in English” (Huang [1883] 1989). However, Huang believed that these merchants were

familiar with pidgin English only for business conversation and failed to see the barrier between trading jargon and “real English.” Therefore, he insisted that “those who wish to master canonical writings and have clear insight into foreign affairs must graduate from the official language school Guangfangyan Guan.”

It is not surprising that officials like Li Hongzhang and literati such as Huang Shiquan and Yang Xun held similar opinions. “The upper crusts were the officials—not the merchants,” wrote Ernest Hauser (1940, 27). Even Western observers easily detected the bias of this classical, imperial tradition. Officials and literati could hardly describe how ordinary people acted and reacted to the changing customs of the treaty ports. Most of the former, in fact, had no knowledge of English at all. Their comments on English and English-speaking Chinese hinged upon how they understood the relationship between the foreign language and the value of traditional Chinese culture. In most cases, the way they disparaged interpreters and other English speakers had nothing to do with their own language proficiency, but was, rather, a reflection of their social statuses. Although the role that merchants played gradually became significant in the treaty ports, classical studies, civil examinations, and traditional beliefs still dominated inside the bureaucratic system. When Li Hongzhang proposed to establish official foreign-language institutes in the early 1860s, he insisted on separating the future language students from merchant-class interpreters, and he criticized the latter as people who “did not know anything else except for material profits and sensual pleasures” (Li Hongzhang 1863). Huang Shiquan also persuaded students not to “imitate the common pidgin speech hastily with ludicrous effects” if they wished to upgrade their social status by becoming official translators in foreign affairs (Huang [1883] 1989).

Not recognizing the identity of this new group of English-speaking Chinese, the literati and scholars tended to simplify the issue of their linguistic skills and merely separated the speakers into two groups: those who mastered the ability to read and translate, and those who picked up only oral pidgin speech. In research, a spectrum needs to be introduced in regard to

English-speaking Chinese linguistic ability.¹⁴ Compradors and office clerks who worked for foreign firms commanded a more comprehensive scope of business English than that of early interpreters and “open-air” linguists; interpreters still referred to pidgin English wordbooks to find appropriate expressions, while lower-class illiterates such as rickshaw pullers and coolies spoke no more than a few phrases of trade lingo. Vernacular writings, in contrast, reveal that compradors and office clerks enjoyed the privilege of speaking English and thereby greatly improved their status, far beyond other English-speaking Chinese. Sources inform us that compradors could always afford fashionable clothes, accountants often smoked cigarettes, and office boys kept their clothes tidy (Chen [1887] 1996). Other members in foreign firms, such as *shroffs* (secretaries), *paolou* (errand runners), and apprentices were able to benefit materially from the ability to speak English (Yi’an zhuren [1906] 1996). Research has demonstrated that compradors and new merchants played a leading role in the material turn and social transitions in the treaty port of Shanghai (Hao 1970, 196–198; Yeh 2007, 13–17). English-language ability distinguished the new merchants from the old ones, and the former developed a new linguistic space as the basic social milieu within which English circulated. At the same time, with much of the pragmatic value added to it, English immensely enriched the social life of the new merchants.

Historical sources indicate that the *yangjingbang* language in fact remained a practical tool of oral communication until the first half of the twentieth century. As trade flourished, Chinese pidgin English circulated widely through social networks in Shanghai. Those who had access to Westerners now included not only compradors and interpreters but also people who lived on the streets, on boats, and so forth. Each group in the trading chain spoke some degree of English. Details of their English-speaking behaviors can be found in Western travel accounts, but scarcely in Chinese records. Unfortunately, not a single account of how lower-class Chinese spoke English was written by the non-elite literate or by lower-class people themselves.

The literate elite therefore frequently voiced their opinions on why lower-class Chinese living in the treaty port of Shanghai spoke English. A review of their accounts might lead us to

assume that most English-speaking Chinese were eager for money. Documents and accounts often describe coolies' and other speakers' shabby clothes, skeleton-like bodies, and clumsy behavior, all of which can be taken to imply that an ability to speak English might help them survive better. Rickshaw coolies used pidgin English to compete for foreign guests, in order to earn more money. Those who attended private English schools, such as merchants and compradors, obviously wished to earn a better living by entering foreign firms. One vernacular poem depicted a type of beggar who acquired pidgin English specifically to communicate with foreigners, and thus to have a better "business" (Ye [1935] 1996). An 1875 account even mentioned a group of crafty old women who bought girls from poor families in Shanghai, and then costumed and passed them off as prostitutes of the *xianshui mei* (saltwater sisters) type¹⁵, who were supposed to be able to speak some English and thereby to obtain more money from their foreign guests (Wang [1875] 1989).

Western reporters and travel writers also wrote of the spread of English to lower-class Chinese. There were direct quotations citing conversations in pidgin English between Chinese and foreign residents in treaty ports; however, almost all the stories were retold by Westerners, not by the English-speaking Chinese themselves. Since most account writers were native English speakers as well as colonial administrators and missionaries, they had a strong preconception of what the English language should be, and they emphasized the strange sentence structure and amusing mispronunciation of the local Chinese people's version of English (Macfarlane 1881, 65–66, 74–75). Their accounts highlighted the differences between the English spoken by local Chinese people and that of native speakers. From most Westerners' perspective, none of the Chinese Englishes was truly English: instead, they were broken, infantile, and full of unusual and unrecognizable words, like "nonsensical rubbish" (Simpson 1877, 45). However, English-speaking Chinese had their own pidgin vocabulary lists, based on which they managed to live in the treaty port. These vocabulary lists became so essential for communication that Westerners in Shanghai also referred to them before conversing with their Chinese colleagues or servants.¹⁵

Early twentieth-century guidebooks for touring Shanghai often contained an introduction on the local language and culture, in which Chinese “pigeon [sic] English” was included as a must-learn lingua franca. C. E. Darwent, in his 1911 *Shanghai: A Handbook for Travellers and Residents*, placed pidgin English in the first part of the “Introductory Information,” where readers were able to find the most useful expressions for different circumstances—for example, shopping, checking into a hotel, hiring a rickshaw, and so on.

Only a few Chinese within a limited group spoke English for trading purposes in 1840s Shanghai; however, in the early twentieth century, local people in various social strata started to employ English in their daily lives. Moreover, English also appeared in the landscape of the treaty port, such as on road signs in English, signboards in Roman letters, and commercial brands in Chinese characters transcribed from English. Transcription turned out to be a medium through which English became rooted in indigenous people’s minds in a way that facilitated linguistic assimilation and digestion. If an English word could be easily repeated through transliteration by local Shanghainese, the name of the road in English would be used more frequently than its official translation in the vernacular. For example, local Shanghainese at the time addressed Boone Road in the International Settlement as *Peng Lu*, although its official translation was *Wen Jianshi Lu* (Bishop Wen Road).¹⁶ An old Shanghainese once recalled that when the No. 1 bus approached Boone Road, bus drivers always announced that the next stop would be *Peng Lu*, whereas only the official translation *Wen Jianshi Lu* (in Chinese characters) was written below the English name *Boone Road* on the road sign. “Walking around all of Shanghai, even if you reach the smallest of lanes, you will still not be able to find a road sign written with two Chinese characters *Peng Lu*” (Mu [1935] 1998, 324–325). Transcribed words, though different than the original English, reflect the real-life immersion of the language with the common people. Words such as “spring-lock”¹⁸, “chance,” “handsome,” etc., have been preserved in the Shanghai vernacular via transcription, a fact that demonstrates the enduring efforts of local Chinese to domesticate English as part of their own language.

Conclusion

English entered the treaty port of Shanghai in the 1840s as a cultural phenomenon, rather than an academic subject. During the second half of the nineteenth century, local Chinese people not only used English to communicate with foreigners but also employed it as a means to explore a foreign presence dominated by Western material culture. English, beyond its linguistic nature as a foreign language, embodied a sociocultural relation between the English-speaking Chinese and the new “international world” in the treaty port of Shanghai. Historical travel notes, vernacular poems, and miscellaneous accounts depicted the speakers’ circumstances, including where they spoke English, to whom, and why, which reflected how they acted and reacted to the changing customs of the treaty-port society.

As a major body of the speakers, compradors and interpreters, as well as office clerks working in foreign firms, were distinguished from the old “merchants”—one of the four classes in the traditional framework of Confucian value—and came to constitute a new profession in the treaty port of Shanghai. English-language ability was the key element that differentiated the new group of merchants from the old one, and English was regarded as a cultural symbol for its social identification. Previous scholarship has not paid enough attention to this group, partially because they were normally believed to serve an assisting position in foreign firms, and hence their English-speaking ability was assumed to have reached only an elementary level. Therefore, details of their English-learning process have been ignored. This article has explored a variety of English-Chinese reference books and information on private English schools in order to reveal the pragmatic value of English in treaty-port Shanghai. The changing style of the glossary references indicates how the new merchants made use of English texts, and what the most important subject was for them to learn during different time periods, in order to face the challenges of treaty-port commerce.

A major concern of this study has been the social identities of English speakers in the treaty port of Shanghai. The speakers were not affiliated with any particular group, but rather with a full range of social strata. Previous scholarship on English in China mainly centered on formal education, and thus the speakers discussed were limited to the literate group. As I have pointed out in this article, the linguistic abilities of various groups of English-speaking Chinese constituted a spectrum, in which each one's cultural power was connected to its linguistic experience. The ability to communicate with so-called "Westerners" not only brought people more opportunities but also facilitated the social transition of a vast group of locals in a treaty-port society. A new linguistic landscape emerged in which local Chinese people's living space was expanded. In this new space, people were able to acquire new information, to start new activities, and to obtain new social status. English, at the same time, acquired a symbolic value that impacted local people's changing attitudes toward these new issues.

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Notes

1. For example, Shi Youwei (2000) mainly talks about foreign loan words in Chinese from a linguistic or sociolinguistic perspective; Qian Nairong (2003) also wrote one chapter on the influence of loan words in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Shanghai, but he focuses only on the resultant linguistic transformation due to language contact.
2. After the First Opium War (1839–1842), the Qing government signed the Treaty of Nanjing with the British government. The treaty opened five cities along the southeast coast as trading ports, including Shanghai in 1843.
3. The dialectal meaning of *bang* is "creek." Yangjing was the original name of one branch river in Shanghai, according to *Hongzhi Shanghai zhi* (Shanghai gazetteer of Hongzhi regime).

4. Wang Tao came to Shanghai in 1849, when he was twenty-two years old. He lived in Shanghai for thirteen years and served in the printing office of the London Missionary Society Mission Press. Wang recorded what he had seen and experienced during the early days in the treaty port of Shanghai in *Yingruan zazhi* (Miscellaneous records of Shanghai), a gazetteer-like publication, in 1875.
5. *Shanghai xianhua* (Chatting about Shanghai) is a source book of the early twentieth century. It also contains miscellaneous records that the author heard about historical Shanghai. Yao Gonghe later became an official clerk of judicature in Shanghai during the 1920s.
6. Under the influence of the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864), a local uprising took place in Shanghai from 1853 to 1855. It was led by the Small Sword Union, a secret union composed of lower-class workers and small business owners originally from Fujian and Guangdong. The local economy suffered immensely due to the chaos caused by the uprising, especially in the foreign settlements of Shanghai.
7. *Taipan* means “great manager,” or “big boss.” This person was usually the chief manager of an overseas branch company in one of the trading ports.
8. The school was established also with the support of several foreign firms, including Jardine, Matheson & Co., Thomas Ripley & Co., and Iverson & Co.
9. Fryer’s use of the word “respectable” here reflects his own viewpoint.
10. According to Li Hongzhang (1863): “Qing she waiguo yuyanwenzi xueguan zhe” (Free schools were established by the English and French [missionaries]). Local poor young children were enrolled at the schools and provided with clothing, food, and education.
11. In 1865, the London Missionary Press reprinted Robert Morrison’s (1782–1834) work *Wuche yun fu* (Five cargos of phonetics), which had first been published in 1819 in Macao as the first Chinese-English dictionary. Although in a reduced format, the letterpress edition of 1865 cost several silver *taels*, according to records, a prohibitive cost for many readers. The lithographic version of *Wuche yun fu* printed in 1879 cost only eighty cents, as shown in advertisements of *Shenbao*, which attracted many students of English in late nineteenth-century Shanghai.
12. Xiong Yuezhi (1999) provides basic information on private English schools in nineteenth-century Shanghai; however, he does not go further to investigate the social function of these schools.
13. The Self-Strengthening Movement, c 1861–1895, was a period of institutional reforms initiated during the late Qing Dynasty, which emphasized the adoption of Western machines, scientific knowledge and training of technical and diplomatic personnel through the establishment of foreign language institutions.
14. The author here wishes to thank the peer reviewer, who was kind enough to draw attention to this important issue.
15. *Xianshui mei* is a vernacular term referring to prostitutes who originally came from

- Guangdong Province and only served foreigners in 1870s Shanghai. These “saltwater sisters” were known for singing vernacular songs.
16. For example, separate editions of Carl Crow’s *Handbook for China* were published in 1915, 1921, 1925, and 1933. Each edition included a section introducing where and when pidgin English is supposed to be used. Carl Crow was born in Missouri in 1883 and came to Shanghai in 1911 as a newspaperman and writer. His *Handbook* was considered a standard reference for foreign visitors to China between the wars.
 17. Boone Road was named after William Boone (1823–1864), a missionary bishop of the American Board of Foreign Missions of the Protestant Episcopal Church who came to Shanghai in 1845. The bishop’s Chinese name was Wen Huilian.
 18. A “spring-lock,” which features a spring-loaded bolt, was imported from the West to late-nineteenth century Shanghai; it differs from a traditional Chinese lock that works by putting a pin through holes.

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