

*Editorial*

## **Introduction to the Special Issue**

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This Covid-19 special issue is the first of its kind to present the most updated research from front-line teacher-researchers in higher educations of different socio-cultural environments, capturing their lived experience and perpetually evolving reflections on Chinese language teaching and learning during the pandemic.

The special issue is situated under the global Covid-19 pandemic context in 2020. At the beginning of the year, the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic pushed many universities in the world to transform their classroom-based courses into online versions in an astonishingly short time. For many conventional Chinese language programmes, the pandemic crisis affected not only the course delivery mode but also teaching approaches and assessment methods. It also posed profound challenges to the current curricula based on traditional in-person educational philosophy. Needless to say, the emergency remote teaching has put enormous pressure on teachers and students in Chinese language programmes all over the world. Many teachers are forced to redesign their courses to ensure that learning objectives can still be achieved through a fair and honest assessment. They are also prompted to navigate new technologies and effective online pedagogies to keep their interactions as engaging as they used to be in the classroom. Students of Chinese are concerned with whether they are able to survive, not to mention succeed, in the challenges of learning a difficult Asian language from a completely novel mode of learning that requires a new set of learning strategies.

Many of the challenges we now face do not have answers in existing research and practices. Research in technology-enhanced language learning, computer-assisted language learning and distance learning has never seen such a massive scale of experiment at any educational level in formal education (e.g. White & Zheng, 2018). Studies carried out in small classes with motivated digital learners are not representative of the diverse student population. We need to respect the fact that many students have moved online with little time to prepare and under involuntary circumstances. Furthermore, excellent online teaching practices powered by well-resourced infrastructure as well as attractive learning games with advanced software do not respond to the reality of the digital divide in different parts of the world (Light, 2001). Popular commercial online courses are typically not aligned with school or university timetables and lack the flexibility and intensiveness to be transformed into mainstream online learning resources.

Therefore, identifying the multiple levels of challenges we face has become an increasingly urgent matter, as well as providing research-based suggestions and guidance to Chinese language teachers in

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different parts of the world. While we are struggling and experimenting with emergency remote teaching, we find it vital to immediately call for our colleagues teaching in different socio-cultural contexts to document their emergency teaching experiences and share their practices that have been beneficial to students learning Chinese in an online environment. We started to call for contributions in early April, and by the end of May, we had received 23 abstracts from many places in the world. Because of the tight schedule for this time-sensitive research, only five high-quality papers were included.

The special issue includes five new empirical studies from authors working in the higher education context outside China, including Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom. With a close focus on the uniqueness of Chinese language teaching, these papers have provided timely reflections and solutions to the unprecedented challenges caused by the global pandemic. As the first group of scholars exploring language education during the pandemic, the authors have chosen to write and publish their papers in English so that these studies can benefit teachers and researchers from outside Chinese communities. In this regard, this special issue is a valuable contribution that Chinese language teaching professionals have provided to the international communities of second language teaching and research. The five papers included in this special issue have covered a wide range of issues in Chinese language teaching, such as curriculum reform and adaptations, innovative course design, teachers' beliefs and professional identities, comparisons of in-person and online teaching approaches, models of Chinese character teaching and learning, etc. In the following paragraphs, we will provide a short introduction of the goals and methods of each study, and identify their implications to Chinese language education as a whole.

The first paper, written by Dr Xiaoping Gao, examines Australian students' perceptions of the challenges and strategies for learning Chinese characters in emergency online teaching. The study investigated 40 students from an Australian university with an online survey. The study points out that the difficulties of learning characters were perceived differently by students depending on whether the mode of learning was performed face-to-face or online. The new strategies and revised assessment methods introduced to students during the pandemic seem to have mitigated the level of difficulties in character learning felt by students. At the same time, students reported new challenges that they faced during emergency remote learning, such as technological and physical barriers and demands for self-discipline and time management abilities, which in turn affected their mental health and motivation for learning. While the majority of students found repeated practice was effective in developing their character writing and reading skills, a few of them felt their performance was affected by technological and physical constraints and shortage of time. The study suggests that Chinese programmes should adopt a research-based curriculum design with newly developed strategies to reduce students' stress and facilitate learning outcomes.

The second paper is contextualised in a New Zealand university. Dr Danping Wang and Prof Martin East call for the use of "emergency Chinese curriculum" as a conceptual framework to capture the complexities of Chinese language teaching during the pandemic. The paper has identified multilevel factors that have affected Chinese language teaching and learning in Western higher education. The data reported in this study are based on two questionnaire surveys with 163 students and interviews with one course director and five teachers in a large-scale beginning Chinese language course. The study first discusses influences based on contextual factors, including social, technological, financial, and organisational, and then demonstrates how the course experienced unprecedented changes to its curriculum delivery, pedagogy and assessment. Factors influencing students' and teachers' participation in the emergency remote course are also discussed. The paper ends by suggesting using the emergency teaching experience as an opportunity for theory innovation in future Chinese teaching and research after the pandemic.

In the third paper, Dr Chun Zhang focuses on exploring Chinese language teachers' beliefs about the modes of online language teaching and their self-assessment of digital competence in a Danish

university. The study aims to emphasise the efforts and contributions made by the front-line teachers during the pandemic, instead of reinforcing or repeating the difficulties they encountered. Informed by narrative and ethnographic research methodologies, 7 Chinese language teachers were investigated. The results of the study have provided a clear picture of what expertise is available for teaching Chinese online and what pedagogical competencies Chinese language teachers need to acquire when digital teaching modes override and replace traditional teaching modes. The findings suggest that teacher belief is an important area to look at when seeking to understand their choices of digital tools and online tasks. This study has the potential to provide insights into redefining the current standards of Chinese teaching pedagogy and teacher education.

Dr Qi Zhang, from an Irish university, has explored how Chinese characters are taught to beginners of Chinese through remote online teaching during the pandemic. The paper begins with a thorough literature review of popular pedagogies in Chinese character teaching and points out that effective methods have so far been based on in-person handwriting practices. Based on the unique nature of the Chinese writing system, the paper confirms that previous research proves the existence of the write-to-read effect and the importance of handwriting to character recognition. Online learning environments can hardly sustain the advantages of handwriting, and, in fact, will only minimise the opportunities of handwriting. The nature of online learning suggests that all pedagogical practices will have to rely on digital input rather than pen and paper. Adopting a narrative method, the study investigated 5 teachers in Ireland and the UK for their first-hand experience of teaching Chinese characters online. The study suggests that knowledge of Chinese characters should also be explicitly incorporated into a well-structured online teaching approach.

The last paper was contributed by Dr Xia Zhao and her co-authors from two universities in the United Kingdom. Through incorporating an innovative crossover course design, the study has successfully compared two new models of Chinese courses under in-person and online learning settings. The two new models are teaching written Chinese without using the spoken form (sound or pinyin) and teaching spoken Chinese without the written form (neither characters nor pinyin). The first four-week block was delivered in the traditional classroom setting, while the remaining weeks took place online due to the impact of Covid-19-related lockdown. Students' comments about the two modes of learning were also very positive, although a slightly different experience was noted in the process of transforming from classroom to online. The study has shown that teaching the spoken and the written Chinese independently is not only practically feasible but also could open new opportunities for pedagogical innovations in Chinese teaching.

Chinese language teaching and research will never be the same in post-Covid-19 language education. We anticipate that online teaching will become the new norm for many educational institutions in the near future, even after the pandemic is fully contained. It is imperative that Chinese language teachers quickly update their professional knowledge and pedagogical skills to respond to new challenges in the forthcoming digital future (Adnan, 2018; Levy, Wang & Chen, 2009). The special issue serves as an excellent exemplar for colleagues in different parts of the world to conduct Covid-19 related research and share their practices. No matter how ill-prepared we once were, this worldwide crisis has become a catalyst for language teachers and universities to explore innovative and realistic solutions (Zhang, 2014). It is also vital to point out that this massive shift towards online teaching has brought about tremendous pressure of using sophisticated digital tools and keeping up with new technologies. Based on his new observations, Cornelius Kubler (2018) has warned us, technology is the tool, not the goal for Chinese language teaching. Following his advice, we hereby encourage more empirical research and reflections to advance theory and pedagogy innovation. We also see opportunities for the Chinese language to get rid of the negative image as a notoriously difficult language in the digital future. More research is required to unlock the potential for the Chinese language to become a global language (Gil, 2020).

Finally, as the editors of the special issue, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to the authors of these five papers. They are not only the course coordinators of the Chinese language programmes in their universities but also front-line teachers themselves. Even while being academic parents, teachers, and researchers simultaneously during stressful lockdown periods, they have still prioritised this special issue project and managed to complete their research papers within only a few months. We would like to thank them for sharing their experiences with Chinese language teaching professionals in other parts of the world. We would also like to extend acknowledgements to our external reviewers. Special thanks go to Dr Jie Zhang from the University of Oklahoma, the United States, Dr Jinghe Han from Western Sydney University, Australia, and Dr Jing Yan from the Education University of Hong Kong. They have managed to return their review comments in days and offered very detailed and insightful comments to our authors. We would also like to thank our two proofreaders, Niki Menzies and Claudia Mason, who helped us enhance the language quality of the papers. We are, of course, indebted to the chief editor of the journal, Kevin Xinghua Liu, for providing the most flexible editorial support and efficient communication with our authors. Without the full support we have from our hardworking authors, reviewers and editors, it is impossible for us to complete this special issue within four months.

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