

Strategic Transformation of Foreign Language Talent Cultivation for Enhanced National Discourse Power

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ABSTRACT

In the evolving landscape of China-U.S. relations, marked by both competition and cooperation, a robust capacity for global discourse is now a paramount national asset. It is crucial for safeguarding core interests and shaping global governance. Yet, China's current international communication system faces several deep-seated challenges. Foreign language teaching often remains "instrumental," which weakens cultural awareness and critical thinking. Translator training tends to focus on "technique" rather than strategic communication needs. In addition, a lack of in-depth country and regional studies limits a thorough understanding of the United States. To address these issues, this paper proposes a systematic reform path. Foreign language education should shift toward "cultural intersubjectivity." A state-led, integrated mechanism should be established for selecting, training, and reserving high-end translation talent. Interdisciplinary country and regional studies must be deepened to cultivate expert strategic professionals who truly "understand the United States." These measures aim to strengthen the talent foundation needed to significantly enhance China's national external discourse capacity.

KEYWORDS

External discourse capacity; Foreign language talent cultivation; Country and regional studies; Translation talent; China-U.S. relations

1 Introduction

As the world enters the third decade of the 21st century, the global balance of power is shifting and the governance system is undergoing deep restructuring. These changes have placed unprecedented demands on nations' capacities for external communication and strategic narrative-building. External discourse capacity is no longer confined to the technical scope of traditional international communication, such as information dissemination and language transfer. It is now deeply embedded in the core processes of building national soft power, shaping the international image, and contending for global discursive influence. This capacity directly relates to how a country legitimizes its interests, how its development path is understood internationally, and how it contributes discursively to global public goods (Chen Xianhong, 2022). Through sustained efforts, China has built an extensive and diversified infrastructure network for external communication. This has significantly raised its international visibility. However, a fundamental tension remains. The quality, structure, and effectiveness of high-end foreign language talent cultivation still fall short. These talents are the very source that sustains the discourse system, yet their preparation is inadequate to fully support the strategic objective of achieving genuine resonance in today's complex international public opinion arena. Effective international discourse communication is, in essence, a practice of strategic engagement. It should be based on deep cultural mutual learning, precise value transmission, and genuine emotional connection—far more than a mechanical transfer of linguistic symbols or a one-way messaging process. Therefore, cultivating a cohort of versatile, expert professionals has become crucial. These professionals must not only be proficient in the language of target countries, but also capable of integrating Chinese and foreign thought. They need substantial humanistic knowledge, keen strategic insight, and strong cross-cultural empathy. Such talents are key to overcoming China's "discourse deficit" and improving the efficacy of its international narratives. From a systems perspective, this study examines the structural mismatch between China's current foreign language talent development system and the strategic requirements of the new era. It then proposes an actionable, systematic reform plan that incorporates educational philosophy, disciplinary development, and macro-strategic orientation.

2 Core Challenges: Three Structural Gaps Between Talent Cultivation and Strategic Needs

China's current foreign language talent cultivation system reveals three interrelated structural gaps that limit the scale and quality of high-end strategic communication professionals.

2.1 The Gap Between "Instrumentalized" Teaching Objectives and the Cultivation of Humanistic and Critical Thinking Abilities

Influenced by pragmatic philosophy and instrumental rationality, China's higher foreign language education has long emphasized examination-oriented and skill-based approaches (Wen Qiufang, 2020). This orientation reduces language learning to a tool for passing standardized tests and achieving communicative functionality. As a result, curriculum design and teaching resources disproportionately focus on compartmentalized skills training—listening, speaking, reading,

writing, and translation—while marginalizing the rich cultural, historical, philosophical, aesthetic, and socio-cognitive dimensions inherent in language. Consequently, although learners may master surface-level grammatical rules and engage in fluent everyday communication, they often lack the substantive ability to use language for deep reflection, critical cultural interpretation, and meaningful value-based dialogue across cultures (Sun Youzhong, 2019). When confronted with complex international issues such as China-U.S. relations, global governance, or human rights discourse, this deficiency becomes evident. Practitioners and learners often resort to factual restatement or opinion repetition, unable to construct theoretically grounded, historically informed, and logically persuasive arguments. This leads to external communication that tends to be superficial, sloganistic, and fragmented in logic, failing to reach the deeper cognitive and emotional levels of international audiences. More seriously, inadequate understanding of different cultural systems may lead to unintentional misinterpretations, triggering unexpected resistance and resulting in the dilemma of “speaking without being understood, communicating without being trusted.”

2.2 The Gap Between “Technicized” Translator Training and the Integrated Demands of Strategic Communication

Translation is not merely a technical exercise of code-switching between languages, but essentially a practice of meaning reconstruction, creative interpretation, and discursive re-engagement across cultural boundaries. However, China’s current model for training professional translators remains largely confined to a “technicist” paradigm, focusing excessively on translation techniques (e.g., addition, omission, conversion, division), terminology management, computer-assisted tools, and stylistic conventions (Wang Ning, 2021). While such training may produce translators competent in handling general or technical texts, it falls short of preparing the high-level interpreters needed for strategic national communication. In fields central to national interests and great-power competition—such as political diplomacy, international law, strategic security, and advanced technology—the state requires not “mouthpieces,” but professionals capable of discerning underlying political intent, historical context, and affective nuance; skillfully navigating discursive traps and ideological narratives; and conveying national positions with political acuity and cultural creativity in high-stakes cross-cultural settings. At present, there is a significant shortage of such “strategic interpreters” or “institutional translators” who combine top-tier language skills with strong political literacy, broad knowledge, and strategic adaptability. This structural gap constrains China’s ability to actively shape global agendas, interpret international norms, and guide public opinion during crises.

2.3 The Gap Between Inadequate Country/Regional Studies and the Need for Deep Understanding of Target Countries

Effective, persuasive discourse communication requires a “thick description” and dynamic grasp of the target country’s political ecosystem, social structures, cultural psychology, historical context, and contemporary trends. Yet there remains a notable disconnect between China’s foreign language education system and in-depth, systematic, interdisciplinary research on the United States, Europe, and other key regions (Wang Jisi, 2021). Many foreign language students and even practitioners form their perceptions of target countries through fragmented, selective, and often biased information from mass media, particularly social platforms, leading to “labeled” (e.g., “liberal hegemony,” “divided society”) and “emotionalized” (either idealized or wholly negative) cognitive distortions (Yuan Peng, 2022). This shallow, non-rational understanding cannot provide accurate audience profiling, contextual analysis, or emotional entry points for communication targeting the U.S. or other regions. Consequently, external discourse strategies often lack relevance, relatability, and cultural resonance, missing their intended mark and sometimes even deepening misunderstandings and reinforcing communication barriers.

3 Pathways for Reform: A Systematic and Refined Strategy Aligned with National Objectives

Addressing these three gaps requires comprehensive reform of the foreign language talent cultivation system, encompassing concepts, mechanisms, and knowledge foundations, guided by the principle of “conceptual leadership, institutional innovation, and knowledge support.”

3.1 Transforming the Foreign Language Education Paradigm: Integrating Skills Training, Humanistic Enrichment, and Critical Thinking

This foundational reform aims to reshape the intellectual structure and knowledge base of foreign language professionals.

3.1.1 Restructuring and Enriching the Core Curriculum

The skill-dominated curriculum must be overhauled. Core undergraduate and graduate programs should significantly increase the weight and depth of courses such as “Introduction to Chinese and World Civilizations,” “Comparative Intellectual History,” “Readings in World Philosophy,” “Critical Intercultural Communication Theory,” “Fundamentals of International Relations,” and “Contemporary China: National Conditions and Discourse.” Courses should emphasize close

reading, comparative analysis, and critical discussion, building an integrated matrix of “language proficiency – cultural literacy – intellectual depth.”

3.1.2 Innovating Pedagogy and Embedding Critical Thinking

The teacher-centered, passive learning model must be replaced with active approaches such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL), case studies, academic debate workshops, and research writing. Critical thinking training should be systematically integrated into all language courses. Students should be guided to analyze complex global issues—e.g., “differentiated responsibilities in climate governance” or “cultural sovereignty in the digital age” —from multiple perspectives, form independent judgments, and construct well-reasoned arguments.

3.1.3 Reforming the Assessment System

Major foreign language proficiency tests (e.g., CET-4/6, TEM-4/8, CATTI) should be revised to reduce the emphasis on isolated language points and rote memory, while increasing the assessment of cultural interpretation, critical reading of complex texts, logical argumentation, and performance in simulated cross-cultural scenarios. This change will help reorient teaching toward holistic education (National Advisory Committee for Foreign Language Teaching in Higher Education, 2022).

3.2 Building a National Strategic Reserve and Capacity Development Mechanism for High-End Translation Talent

This reform is crucial for developing a “language special force” that serves top-level diplomatic and strategic communication needs.

It is recommended that central foreign affairs authorities, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Publicity Department (National International Communication Administration), and the Ministry of Education collaborate with leading institutions such as Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University, and China Foreign Affairs University to launch a “Long-Term Development Plan for National Strategic Translation Talent.” The plan should identify promising candidates from senior undergraduates and graduate students nationwide through rigorous selection, including in-depth interviews, psychological and political screening, stress tests, and cross-cultural sensitivity assessments, focusing on those with exceptional language aptitude, analytical thinking, political steadfastness, emotional stability, broad intellectual curiosity, and cultural perceptiveness.

Selected individuals should undergo integrated training, potentially through continuous Bachelor’s-Master’s-Doctoral tracks or specialized Master’s programs. Training should transcend campus boundaries, incorporating structured phases of advanced theoretical study at universities, rotational internships at ministries (e.g., Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce), strategic research apprenticeships at leading think tanks, and short-term placements in international organizations. Trainees should participate in real document translation, observe and assist in major diplomatic events, and engage in policy research discussions, thereby honing their political judgment, policy comprehension, on-the-spot responsiveness, and strategic discourse mediation skills in authentic, high-pressure settings.

Building on existing national talent databases, a dedicated and secure “National High-End Translation and Cross-Cultural Communication Talent Reserve” should be established. Talent admitted to the reserve should be categorized by language, specialization (e.g., politics, economics, security, technology), and competency level for dynamic management. A periodic “recall” training mechanism should provide ongoing instruction in political theory, international developments, terminology updates, and psychological resilience. An efficient and confidential emergency deployment protocol must also be designed to ensure that during critical moments—such as summit diplomacy, major international conferences, or public diplomacy crises—a core team of translators and communication specialists who are politically reliable, professionally outstanding, and well-coordinated can be rapidly assembled from the reserve.

3.3 Deepening Country and Regional Studies to Cultivate Expert Strategic Talent with a “Thorough Understanding of the United States”

This reform provides the intellectual foundation, supplying precise “cognitive maps” and in-depth expertise for external discourse practice.

3.3.1 Strengthening Interdisciplinary Research Platforms and Autonomous Knowledge Production

The state should support the establishment of substantive “Institutes of Country and Regional Studies” or “Centers for American Studies” through initiatives such as the “Double First-Class” project and major research grants in philosophy and social sciences. These centers must genuinely integrate foreign language studies with disciplines like international relations, political science, history, sociology, economics, law, and digital communication. Interdisciplinary research teams should be encouraged to conduct long-term, primary-source empirical studies on issues such as “the social roots of political polarization in the United States,” “the ecosystem and legal framework of U.S. technological innovation,” and “the formation and evolution of U.S. discourse on China,” producing original scholarship that explains underlying

mechanisms, anticipates trends, and carries independent theoretical and policy significance (Katzenstein, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2023). Critical reflection on existing Western paradigms in area studies should be encouraged to develop a distinctively Chinese scholarly framework.

3.3.2 Expanding Deep, Immersive Exchange and On-the-Ground Engagement

Balancing developmental and security considerations, China should proactively design and expand multi-level, multi-channel substantive academic and cultural exchanges with the United States. In addition to traditional scholarly visits and student exchanges, special funding should support Chinese researchers and doctoral students to conduct long-term immersive fieldwork, archival study, or longitudinal observation in the U.S., engaging deeply with local communities, think tanks, universities, businesses, and political activities to gain firsthand, nuanced social and cultural understanding beyond media portrayals. Innovative formats such as Sino-U.S. young scholars' "joint fieldwork workshops" or "closed-door strategic dialogues" on specific topics can help build professional networks based on collaborative research and mutual trust, breaking down information silos and stereotypes.

3.3.3 Systematically Developing an Echelon of "U.S.-Knowledgeable" Experts with Scholarly and Policy Influence

The ultimate aim is to systematically cultivate a cohort of truly knowledgeable experts on the United States. They should be adept at high-level academic writing and dialogue in English, and capable of analyzing U.S. domestic and foreign policy logic, strategic behavioral patterns, and socio-ideological trends from historical, structural, institutional, and cultural-psychological perspectives. These experts should serve as bridges connecting academia, policy circles, and the public. They can provide authoritative, research-based analysis and policy assessments to domestic decision-makers, while also articulating China's positions clearly, rebutting misconceptions effectively, and fostering an objective and amicable international perception through international forums, mainstream media, and public diplomacy platforms. They constitute indispensable "strategic assets" and a "cognitive firewall" in China's engagement with the United States.

4 Conclusion

Enhancing national external discourse capacity is a long-term, systematic endeavor rooted in talent development. Confronted with a transforming world and complex major-power relations, China must adopt a holistic and forward-looking strategic approach to reform its foreign language talent cultivation system conceptually, institutionally, and resource-wise. Shifting foreign language education from an instrumental to a humanistic-critical paradigm will solidify the cultural foundation for meaningful discourse production; establishing a state-led integrated mechanism for selecting, training, deploying, and reserving strategic translation talent will create a pivotal force for discourse mediation; and deepening interdisciplinary country and regional studies will provide the knowledge infrastructure for effective external communication. These three components, working in synergy, aim to cultivate versatile expert professionals who possess a strong sense of national purpose, a global outlook, linguistic excellence, and strategic communication wisdom. Only through such a talent base can China not only make its voice heard but also ensure that its stories are compellingly told, its perspectives convincingly explained, and its values widely recognized in the global discourse landscape, thereby contributing more persuasive discursive power to national rejuvenation and the building of a shared future for humanity. Future efforts must also consider the disruptive impact of digital and intelligent technologies on international discourse forms and continue to explore innovative pathways for talent cultivation.

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