Article

Evolution of interpreting as a social practice in China during the past four decades. An analysis of Chinese discourse on interpreting through the lens of social practice theory

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Abstract

This article examines how interpreting has evolved as a social practice in China and how it has been shaped by the changing social environment during the past four decades. Viewing interpreting as a social practice, the study employs an adapted three-element model from the social practice theory as the analytic framework. Through a qualitative thematic and content analysis of about 50 relevant articles representing the three sets of elements, which are selected from a database of Chinese articles on interpreting, and published in quality journals of Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index/Core Journals of China in the past four decades, the "competences," "meanings," and "materials" of the social practice of interpreting are identified and their evolution in different periods are analysed. Through an examination of the economic, socio-political, and technological developments in China during the past four decades, the evolution of interpreting in three periods (late 1970s to early 1990s, the mid-1990s to early 2000s, and 2007 to

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present) are identified, and the role of the changing environment in shaping the social practice of interpreting is revealed.

1. Introduction

Interpreting is not only a behaviour involving bilingual processing, cognitive processing, and information processing, but also an interpersonal and intercultural communicative activity, as well as a socio-cultural activity (B. H. Wang, 2019). Most previous research efforts in interpreting studies have been dominated by cognitive processing in conference interpreting (Galvão, 2015, p. 173) and communicative interaction in community (and sign-language) interpreting (Hertog & Van der Veer, 2006). Recently, more research has emerged viewing interpreting as a social activity, thereby expanding the field of research from its focus on process and performance/product to a wider spectrum revealing the role and function of the interpreting activity in the socio-cultural context (B. H. Wang & Gao, 2020).

Previous studies on interpreting as a social activity have paid most attention to the roles and identities of the interpreters (Boéri, 2008; Inghilleri, 2005, 2006; Ren, 2020; Wadensjö, 1998). Role, which can be defined as "a set of expectations society has of individuals in a given social position or status" (Baert, 2006, p. 524), has been studied mostly in community interpreting with the focus on "dialogic discourse-based interaction" (Pöchhacker, 2004, p. 79) and interpersonal interaction (Wadensjö, 1998). While the conduit view perceiving interpreters as linguistic translation machine has been deconstructed and their roles as "communication facilitators and advocates" (Roy, 1993) and "intercultural agents" (Barsky, 1996) have been revealed, how their roles and identities are shaped by the broader socio-cultural context has not been explored adequately with the exception of a few pioneering studies. For example, Inghilleri (2005, 2006); examined the impact of macro-social constraints on interpreting events in asylum settings and on the habitus of interpreters. Boéri (2008) discussed volunteer and activist practices of interpreting in the context of the World Social Forum by adopting a narrative perspective. Ren (2020) investigated how Chinese interpreters understood and practised the ethical principles of integrity, competence, fidelity, neutrality, and confidentiality. Her study used Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital as analytical tools in analysing the data of email interviews with interpreters, autobiographies, and narrations produced by interpreters and institutional documents.

Though identity can be used to refer to both individual and collective identities, relevant research interests in interpreting studies have mainly concerned collective identities of interpreters with the focus on professional identity, which can be defined as "an aggregate set of beliefs, values, motives and experiences relating to work, shared by a definable group and leading to a professional role" (Rudvin, 2015, p. 432). As seen from the definition, identity is "a complex entity constituted by a number of complex

socio-cultural interactions" (Rudvin, 2015, p. 432) that is closely related to role. Identities can be constructed through self-perception and defined by others in the society. In interpreting studies, professional identity and status is a topic that has received increasing attention. For example, Diriker (2009) discussed discursive construction of interpreters' identity in the meta-discourse of the profession, including handbooks, codes of ethics, publications of professional organisations, and the media; Setton and Guo (2011) surveyed attitudes of Chinese interpreters and translators to role, status, and professional identity in Shanghai and Taipei; Zwischenberger (2011) investigated conference interpreters' self-representation of identity through a worldwide web-based survey; and Du and Wang (2021) examined the image and identify of interpreters in China as perceived by the public media.

In summary, previous studies on interpreting as a social activity have paid most attention to the roles and identities of the interpreters, while research is still scarce about how the interpreting activity constitutes a social practice and how the social practice of interpreting is shaped by the broader socio-cultural context. Moreover, although a few scholars (e.g., Inghilleri, 2003; Wolf & Fukari, 2007) have pointed out the potential of applying sociological theories to researching interpreting as a socially situated activity, so far, the most productive efforts have been the application of Bourdieusian sociological concepts to interpreting studies, including habitus, capital, and field (Bourdieu, 1977).

This article examines how the social practice of interpreting has been perceived and represented by interpreting practitioners, trainers and researchers in China in their published discourse on interpreting, and how the changing environment of China's "Reform and Opening-up" in the past four decades has shaped the social practice of interpreting. Based on an analysis of their published discourse on interpreting and of the economic, socio-political, and technological developments in China during the past four decades, two major questions are explored: (a) How has the social practice of interpreting been represented and perceived by practitioners, trainers and researchers in their published discourse on interpreting? (b) How has the social practice of interpreting evolved with and been shaped by the changing social environment in China during the past four decades?

2. Methodology

2.1 An adapted three-element model for analysing interpreting as a social practice

The social practice theory, which has been developed in sociology (Schatzki, 2001; Shove et al., 2012; Spaargaren et al., 2016; etc.), puts its focus of analysis on social practice linking individuals and society. Instead of individuals being the subject of analysis, the social practice theory sees individuals as carriers of a social practice. According to this theory, social practices are practised by practitioners with relevant knowledge and skills. They are conducted with particular purposes and value, so they are guided by particular teleo-affective structure (Reckwitz, 2002).

A social-practice theoretical approach to translation and interpreting (T&I) foregrounds T&I as dynamic, relational, and normatively governed social practice. It does not privilege individual translators and interpreters but regards them as carriers of the practice and as points of intersection, for a multitude of practices, and it considers how
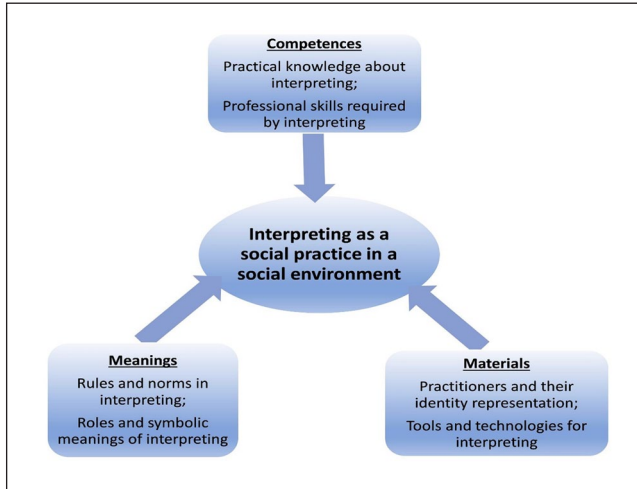
Figure 1. An Adapted Three-Element Model for Analysing Interpreting as a Social Practice.

T&I practice is entwined with and dependent on other social practices (Olohan, 2020, p. 61).

Shove et al. (2012, pp. 22–25) proposed a useful model for analysing social practices, which comprises three sets of elements: materials, competences, and meanings. Materials include infrastructures, devices/tools, and technologies and the body (practitioner) of the social practice. Competences include the practical knowledge (know-how) of the practice, and the skills to execute the practice. Meanings include symbolic meanings, rules, and teleo-affectivity, which have normative functions for the practice.

Proceeding from their model, an adapted three-element model can be proposed for analysing interpreting as a social practice, as shown in Figure 1.

From the perspective of social practice theory, interpreting can be seen as a social activity that is practised on the basis of materials by practitioners with appropriate competences, which is conducted with social meanings (linguistic, communicative and inter-personal, and socio-cultural) in a social environment. As depicted in Figure 1, the social practice of interpreting is constituted of the following three set of elements:

1. Competences, including (a) Practical knowledge about interpreting: *What is interpreting?* (b) Professional skills required by interpreting: *What skills are required for the interpreting process and in accomplishing the activity?*
2. Meanings, including (a) Rules and norms of interpreting: *What are the criteria for the interpreting product? How is it assessed? What are the professional norms?* (b) Roles and symbolic meanings of interpreting: *What is interpreting for? What are the roles of the interpreter?*
3. Materials, including (a) Practitioners of interpreting: *Who conduct the social practice of interpreting and represent their identity?* (b) Tools and technologies for interpreting: *What tools and technologies are used in interpreting?*

With the adapted three-element model, not only the above questions constituting the epistemological foundation of interpreting studies can be analysed, but also other meaningful questions about interpreting as a social practice and its evolution can be examined, such as (see Olohan, 2020, p. 148): How is the social practice of interpreting constituted by materials, competences and meanings? How does it evolve in different ages? What are the major social factors shaping its evolution?

2.2 Data selection and analysis procedure

In terms of data collection, a database of Chinese discourse on interpreting was built with the articles on interpreting published in quality CSSCI/CORE journals[1] in China from late 1970s to the year of 2020, which were collected through topic searches in *China Academic Journals* (CAJ) (中国期刊网), the biggest database of Chinese journals. The articles were published in the 14 CSSCI/CORE journals in the broad area of foreign language studies, all of which include T&I studies in their scope. The journals are: *Chinese Translators Journal*, *Chinese Science & Technology Translators Journal*, *Shanghai Journal of Translators*, *Foreign Language World*, *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, *Foreign Languages Research*, *Foreign Languages in China*, *Foreign Language Research, Journal of PLA University of Foreign Language*s, *Journal of Foreign Languages*, *Foreign Language Education*, *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, *Language and Translation*, and *Modern Foreign Languages*. To make the searches as exhaustive as possible, various topic words (主题词) were used in the searches, including "口译" (interpreting), "传译" (interpreting), "译员" (interpreters), "交传" (consecutive interpreting), and "同传" (simultaneous interpreting [SI]). As the result, about 800 Chinese journal articles on interpreting were collected from the quality CSSCI/CORE journals published between the late 1970s and 2020.

As the first step of the study, an initial analysis was done on the titles and abstracts of all the journal articles in the database to identify their themes. It is found that the articles fall broadly into five categories (see B. H.): (a) interpreter training, such as training concepts, curriculum and programme design, teaching methods, textbooks, learner's factor, and assessment and testing; (b) interpreting techniques and issues in practice and profession, such as techniques in note-taking, techniques in coping with complex numbers in interpreting, and new forms of interpreting practice; (c) interpreting product, such as analysis of interpreted discourse, discussion of its quality; (d) interpreting process, which focus on cognitive processing issues, such as working memory, pauses, and anxiety; and (e) theoretical issues in interpreting studies, such as introduction or review of new theories and concepts, discussion of and reflection upon paradigms, approaches, and methodology in interpreting studies. Through manual screening of the themes of the articles, 64 articles were identified from the database as potentially representative of the three sets of elements of interpreting as a social practice, namely, competences, meanings, and materials.

In the second step, another round of analysis was conducted through close reading of the complete content of the representative articles, after which one article was selected from those published on the same element in the same period. As the result, about 50 relevant articles that represent the three sets of elements are selected as the data for the

analysis in this study. As seen from their author information, about a third of the articles were authored by interpreting practitioners and the rest by interpreting trainers and researchers.

As the third step, qualitative content analysis was done through the lens of the adapted three-element model of interpreting as a social practice. The paragraphs on different sets of elements of the interpreting activity, that is, competences, meanings, and materials, were annotated in the content analysis. The different accounts published in different periods on the same set of elements were compared with each other to identify the evolution of discourse on interpreting, and these results are presented in Section 3.

In the fourth step, the major economic, socio-political, and technological developments in the social environment that have been perceived as relevant to the evolution of interpreting in China during the past four decades by the interpreting practitioners, trainers, and researchers in their published discourse, are identified. The results are summarised in Section 4.

3. How has the social practice of interpreting been represented in published Chinese discourse on interpreting?

3.1 Competences—Practical knowledge: What is interpreting?

A total of 16 journal articles were identified as representing the discourse on practical knowledge as an important element for the social practice of interpreting.

The discourse in early 1980s summarised major modes of working in (conference) interpreting and defined the features of interpreting in comparison with translation. Yueran Li, a Chinese/Russian interpreter who worked for the first generation of national leaders of the People's Republic of China (PRC), summarised interpreting working modes as consecutive interpreting, SI, and "quasi simultaneous interpreting" (commonly known as whispering to ears 咬耳朵) (Li, 1980). Shukong Zhong, an interpreting trainer for the UN Training Programme for Interpreters and Translators in Beijing, summarised three typical forms of interpreting: consecutive interpretation, simultaneous interpretation, and on-sight interpretation (S. K. Zhong, 1981). What is noteworthy is how S. K. Zhong (1981) defined interpreting in contrast to translation:

> INTERPRETATION essentially means an **extempore** oral reproduction, in another language, of what is said in another language . . . The term "interpretation" is used when the **immediate** rendition of a speech is reproduced orally in a language other than that spoken by the original speaker. (Translated into English by the current author; boldface emphasis by the current author. The same hereinafter.)

Li (1980) also defined the features of interpreting as follows:

> The interpreting work has its own characteristics: the biggest of all is achieving **on-the-spot** effectiveness (当场收效). In interpreting one seldom has time to deliberate on the translation, so the interpreter has to be good at **conversion between the two languages within a split second**.

Both early practitioners of interpreting in China noted that extemporaneousness is a distinctive feature that distinguishes interpreting from translation.

From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, interpreters and trainers in China began to analyse the interpreting process in more details. For example, Liu and Bao (1994) borrowed from the Paris School, pointing out: "Professional interpreting procedure comprises source-language comprehension, deverbalisation and target-language re-expression."

Informed by the Theory du Sens and the Effort Models, Liu (2002) elaborated on the interpreting process as follows:

> The interpreting process is a process of **deverbalizing** from the source language, memorising the discoursal meaning and conveying the communicative meaning. The translating process is actually a mental process for the interpreter. **The communicative meaning** is the result integrating linguistic meaning, communicative context and the interpreter's cognitive knowledge.

In 2005, a survey found that interpreting began to take the shape of a professional social practice in China:

> According to our survey, the interpreting market needs in China are booming; interpreting, esp. international conference interpreting has begun to **constitute a specialised category in profession**. We think it is necessary to regulate the market and it is an urgent issue now to establish a system of interpreter training, testing and accreditation (E. Wang, 2005).

After that, with the formal approval granted by the Academic Degree Committee of the State Council of the Chinese government in 2007 to open the new professional post-graduate degree of Master in Translation and Interpreting (MTI) in higher education institutions, the nature of interpreting as a professional social practice was formally recognised, and its features, modes, and its sub-disciplinary position in education and research were gradually mapped to the full, which are represented by the following excerpts of published discourse on interpreting:

> According to the "Guideline on the Establishment of the Professional Degree of Master in Translation and Interpreting," in order to cultivate **high-level specialised talents in translation and interpreting of the professional type**, it was decided to set up the degree of Master in Translation and Interpreting in China (W. H. Zhong, 2007).

> Interpreting has the following **defining features that distinguish it from translation**: immediacy of the interpreting process, singular delivery of the source and target discourses, co-presence of participants of the communicative event and orality of the source and target discourse (W. H. Zhong & Wang, 2010).

Conceiving interpreting studies as a (sub)discipline within Translation Studies, W. H. Zhong and Wang (2010) proposed a disciplinary framework for interpreting studies, which outlines its conceptual perspectives, research objects, methodological approaches. B. H. Wang (2019) proposed for interpreting studies a multi-dimensional epistemological framework, which intends to map interpreting behaviours and activities to the full:

from interpreting as immediate bilingual processing, as complex cognitive operation and management, as immediate information processing and discourse reproduction to interpreting as interpersonal and cross-cultural communication and as a professional and socio-cultural activity. The article also designed a comprehensive framework outlining interdisciplinary methodological approaches for interpreting studies, ranging from cognitive and neuro-physiological, linguistic, and discourse analytical, to communicative, socio-cultural, historical, and pedagogical.

After 2007, some new settings of interpreting were recorded to make their way into Chinese discourse on interpreting, including community interpreting (Su, 2009), health care interpreting (Su, 2010), telephone interpreting (Xiao & Yu, 2009), sign-language interpreting (J. H. Wang, 2009), court interpreting (Zhao & Zhang, 2011), and remote (simultaneous) interpreting (X. M. Wang & Wang, 2021; Yao, 2011).

It is noticeable, however, that there is still a lack of diversity about interpreting in terms of language, ethnicity, and gender. In terms of language combinations, English and Mandarin Chinese are always the dominant language pair while other languages are always labelled as "less-commonly-used languages" (非通用语种) (Liu, 2002). While in the past decade, interpreting has begun to be provided for the "Two Sessions" between Mandarin Chinese and ethnic minority languages (such as Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, Kazakh, Korean, Yi language and Zhuang language), mediated communication between dialects is not widely recognised as interpreting in the market. Sign language interpreting has become more prominent and visible in China in the past decade, with increasing awareness about accessibility and rights of the deaf and hard-of-hearing. In terms of gender, according to a recent study about media reports on interpreters in China by Du and Wang (2021), female interpreters receive much more media attention than their male counterparts. Most new headlines about interpreters included the phrase "beautiful woman" and a description of the interpreter's appearance, which is also a frequent topic in the news texts. An overwhelming majority of the photos included in the news reports are of female interpreters.

3.2 Competences—Professional skills: How is the interpreting process and what training is required?

Fourteen articles were identified from the database as representing the discourse on professional skills as an important element for interpreting as a social practice. In the 1980s, although there were only sporadic publications on interpreting in quality journals, interpreting practitioners in China had published their understanding about the interpreting process and skills required in interpreters based on their working experience, with the earliest publication that can be traced back to the late 1950s (Tang & Zhou, 1958). According to the early practitioners, such as Yueran Li, the procedure of interpreting is listening, memorising, thinking, and expression (听-记-思-表), which proceed in a cycle but they often need to be conducted concurrently (Li, 1980). According to S. K. Zhong (1981), the key to simultaneous interpretation is to "surmount the 'inner psychological impediments' inhibiting the interpreter from speaking while listening." Therefore, the "special mechanism" of simultaneous interpretation is:

> [. . .] to strike a proper balance between listening and speaking. In other words, one has to learn, through conscientious and persistent practice, to set his mind in such way that he devotes only an appropriate part of his attention to "listening-cum-comprehension" and **devotes, as he progresses, an increasingly greater part of his attention to the "best possible instant transference and delivery"** while listening to the speech being made.

It is interesting to see that they have highlighted "thinking" and "instant transference" as integral steps for the interpreting process, while typical discourse on the interpreting process in the West would list listening and analysis, memory, and production as the cognitive efforts that need to be coordinated in the process (Gile, 1995, p. 169). That might be because Chinese as a working language in interpreting is so different from those languages in the West that "transference" would stand out requiring noticeable effort in interpreting.

In terms of skills and requirements in interpreters, the two early practitioners outlined the following:

> Interpreters must **know the Party's foreign affairs policy as well as other policies and guidelines**. They must also have high proficiency both in Chinese and in their foreign languages, can speak eloquently, have broad knowledge, good memory and logical thinking (Li, 1980).

> In addition to (1) **a strong sense of duty**, (2) a fairly good command of the two languages involved, (3) a broad range of knowledge of a number of subjects . . . the basic requirements also include: (4) acute hearing, (5) a good articulation and elocution, (6) familiarity with "simultaneous note-taking," (7) a good memory, (8) mastery of the mechanism of "listening and speaking at the same time" [for simultaneous interpretation] (S. K. Zhong, 1981).

Both early practitioners of interpreting in China emphasised the importance of following institutional policies and of having a strong sense of duty, which must be a reflection of the socio-political environment in China in that era.

From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, trainers showed more awareness about the role of interpreting skills in interpreter training. Liu and Bao (1994) pointed out that some pre-conditions need to be met before skill-based interpreting training: tutors should have rich interpreting experience and students should have no difficulty in understanding the foreign language, can express flexibly, and possess aptitudes, such as concentration, fast reaction, good memory, and analytic mind. Therefore, (foreign) language enhancement is necessary for students. W. H. Zhong (2001) highlighted that interpreter training should focus on skills rather than themes and presented the first systematic syllabus of consecutive interpreting skills and of SI skills in China, which has since become one of the most-cited articles in interpreter training studies. W. H. Zhong (2003) proposed a formula of knowledge requirements for interpreters (KI): $KI = KL + EK + S (PS + AP)$ (knowledge for languages + encyclopaedic knowledge + professional interpreting skills and artistic presentation skills), which would soon serve as the conceptualisation base for curriculum design of specialised interpreting programmes in China.

In 2007, the Guideline on the Establishment of the Professional Degree of MTI stipulated that graduates with the MTI degree should have strong applied linguistic competence, proficient interpreting skills, and broad knowledge (W. H. Zhong, 2007). B. H.

Wang (2007) proposed a model of interpreting competence and a model of interpreter competence, with the former comprising bilingual competence, extra-linguistic knowledge, and interpreting skills and the latter also psycho-physiological competence and professional qualities.

After a few years of piloting the first batch of MTI programmes in China, some trainers put forward systematic conceptualisation about interpreter competence and its development with the aim to developing curriculum and designing pedagogical techniques for interpreting programmes. Liu (2011) presented a detailed table summarising pedagogical activities for different stages of interpreting competence: from the introductory stage to sub-skills training, mock practising, and consolidation and automation in CI training, and from the transitional stage to preparatory stage with sight translation, sub-skills training, consolidation, and automation and relay interpreting in SI training. B. H. Wang (2012b) outlined the development of interpreter competence as corresponding to three stages of interpreter training: (a) enhancing bilingual competence and building up extra-linguistic knowledge before interpreting training, (b) learning and mastering interpreting skills during interpreting training, and (c) acquisition of professional competence after interpreting training. Accordingly, a model of curriculum was proposed for the new programmes of BA in T&I and MTI in China. More recently, W. W. Wang et al. (2018) developed the scales and descriptors for different levels of interpreting competence as part of the national project of China's Standards of English Language Ability.

In the period after 2007, empirical studies about the interpreting process and interpreting training have also grown significantly in Chinese discourse on interpreting. For example, Dai and Xu (2007) compared the features of note-taking between expert interpreters and novice interpreters. W. Zhang (2008) studied the effect of SI on working memory growth potential, which is found to be characterised more by a higher efficiency in allocating cognitive resources than by an increase in memory capacity. Lin et al. (2015) investigated how student interpreters allocate their limited working memory resources to two sub-processes of interpreting: source language comprehension and language reformulation. Through a comparison between reading for repetition and reading for interpreting, it was found that the facilitative effect of Chinese transliterated words (as the indicator of language reformulation) was present in reading for interpreting only, which suggested the co-occurrence of source language comprehension and language reformulation in interpreting (or parallel processing including both comprehension and partial reformulation).

3.3 Meanings—Rules and norms in interpreting: How is the interpreting product assessed? What are the professional norms?

Seven articles were identified as representing the discourse on rules and norms in interpreting as an important element for interpreting as a social practice. In terms of rules and criteria for interpreting, or how the interpreting product is assessed, interpreters and trainers prior to the 1990s discussed ideal quality standards and criteria. For example, Li (1980) postulated that the standards of interpreting are accuracy, smoothness, and timeliness (准, 顺, 快), in which smoothness means good target-language use that is clear and easy to understand, and timeliness means both quick rendition and fluency. Hu (1988)

proposed the first set of marking criteria for effectiveness in interpreting, including: clarity, fluency, idiomatic language, appropriate speed in delivery, pleasant voice, and so on.

In the early 2000s, some scholars realised the deficiency of ideal standards and static criteria and that interpreting quality is actually related to various factors. Different assessments done from different perspective and with different purposes have different results (Cai & Fang, 2003). They began to explore quantitative methods in their pursuit of scientific assessment. For example, Cai (2003) pointed out that information is an essential aspect of quality, and she proposed that information should be assessed both in quantity (number of information units, or propositional sense units) and in quality (logic and information structure).

During the past decade, the horizons of interpreting assessment have been further expanded. Considering interpreting not only as a product but also as a service, the role of norms in interpreting has been explored by several researchers. Based on a corpus of consecutive interpreting in Chinese Premiers' press conferences after the "Two Sessions," B. H. Wang (2012a) identified the norms of explicitation in logic relations, specificity in information content, and explicitness in intended meaning, which actually optimised the communicative effect of interpreting though they might be perceived as a violation to the prescribed norms of no addition, change or omission. Based on surveys, W. Wang and Mu (2013) pointed out that there is always the potential of a gap between users' expected product and actual interpreting product, between the interpreter's expected product and the actual interpreting product, and between the interpreter's perceptions and users' need, so that, the interpreter has to constantly negotiate between professional norms and user' expectations so as to ensure interpreting quality and also customer satisfaction.

Professional norms are always prescribed in the form of code for practice and ethical principles. The recent years witnessed more explicit and focussed discussion of these in Chinese discourse on interpreting. After the China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI) piloted in 2003, Feng (2007) called for the inclusion of code of professional ethics in the accreditation test for interpreters. As business liaison interpreting has become a major interpreting practice in China after its entry to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, Xiang and Zheng (2015) conducted a questionnaire survey among business liaison interpreters and clients, which found: both interpreters and clients confirm that liaison interpreters assume the tasks of both "translating and coordinating"; among the three ethics (service, communication, and norm-based), which allow coordinating, "ethics of communication" are most widely accepted; both groups acknowledge the constraint of translation ethics over the freedom of action though they confirm liaison interpreters should be empowered with more latitude to intervene.

3.4 Meanings—Symbolic meanings and roles: What is interpreting for? What are the roles of the interpreter?

Seven articles were identified as representing the discourse on symbolic meanings and roles in interpreting as an important element for interpreting as a social practice. As a social activity, interpreting is conducted with purposes and carries symbolic meanings. In this regard, representative interpreting practitioners who served for the government prior to the 1980s (e.g., Li, 1980) and in the 1980s and the 1990s (e.g., Xu, 2000) have the following perceptions about the function of the interpreting activity and the interpreter's roles:

> **The work of interpreting has two sides: objective subordination and subjective initiative.** And they are in dialectical unity: On one hand, interpreting is subordinate work. The speaker's ideas and content are the principal and the interpreter is a tool at disposal. In this sense, interpreting is passive. However, this tool is active because the interpreter has their own mind. How well the ideas and content are represented in another language is up to the interpreter's proficiency and skills. In this sense, interpreting is active (Li, 1980).

> **Diplomatic interpreters must follow these principles:** aligning with the position of the government, having a thorough understanding of the policies of the government, following closely international and national political, social, cultural, economic affairs, being able to transmit messages with discretion and precision, and observing strict discipline and professional ethics (Xu, 2000).

While the above discourse represents Chinese institutional interpreters' perceptions about their roles in serving the nation and the principal, the early 2000s began to see changes related to this, which is indicated in the discourse published by institutional interpreters and translators from government agencies. For example, Huang (2004) proposed the principle of "three proximities in external-oriented publicity" (外宣三贴近原则), including proximity to the actual situation of China's development, proximity to the foreign audience's needs in information acquisition, and proximity to way of thinking of the foreign audience. Pan and Wang's (2021) corpus-based study comparing between the 1990s and the 2010s also found that institutional interpreting has become more target-oriented with more consideration about communication to and reception by the target audience in foreign countries.

More recently practitioners and scholars have become more aware of the complexity involved in interpreters' roles. Ren and Jiang (2006) revealed their active participatory roles from a discourse analytical perspective and questioned the traditional view of "conduit" and "invisible man." Zhao and Zhang (2011), through an examination of court interpreting discourse, highlighted the role of court interpreter as institutional gatekeeper, that is, participant and mediator of communication in the court. A survey about self-perception of conference interpreters' roles, done by W. Zhang (2013), found that interpreters are active participant of the interpreted communication activity and that their roles are not fixed but change accordingly with the levels of interpreting experience, working environment, working mode, and personal styles. Also, their role identity has a direct bearing on their choice of interpreting strategies and their self-perception about effectiveness in interpreting. The role and function of interpreting in major historical events have also been discussed by scholars. According to B. H. Wang and Gao (2020), while ideology and values shape interpreting behaviours and product, interpreting also (re)construct ideology especially in international communication of news and political discourse.

3.5 Materials—Practitioners: Who represent the interpreters' identity?

Seven articles were identified as representing the discourse about representative interpreting practitioners as an important element for interpreting as a social practice. As

seen from the Chinese discourse on interpreting published during the past four decades, interpreting practitioners before the mid-1990s in China were represented by institutional interpreters, who were either staff interpreters of the foreign affairs offices of the government or of Chinese delegations to various international organisations, especially the United Nations (UN). Among them some names were mentioned more often than others in the Chinese discourse on interpreting, including: Sheng Tang, who provided SI for the Asia-Pacific Regional Peace Conference held in Beijing in 1952 and the First Session of the Eighth Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1956 (Tang & Zhou, 1958); Chaozhu Ji, who interpreted for the Korean Armistice Negotiations from 1952 to 1953 (Ji, 2013); Jiading Guo, who also interpreted for the Korean Armistice Negotiations and served as chief interpreter for the Chinese Permanent Mission to the UN from 1971 to 1981 (Guo, 2004); Wensheng Tang, who was Chairman Mao's English interpreter in the 1970s and interpreted for his meeting with President Nixon in 1972 (Zong, 2009); Hanzhi Zhang, who interpreted for the series of negotiations in the 1970s on establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the United States (H. Z. Zhang, 2006).

From the late 1990s to the first decade of the 2000s, although the private market began to emerge for interpreting mostly on business occasions, institutional interpreters, especially those who interpreted for the Chinese Premiers' press conferences after the annual "Two Sessions" of the Chinese congress, became quite prominent in perceptions by the public through media and in the published discourse on interpreting in China. The names that were mentioned more often than others are Jianmin Zhang, Tong Zhu, and Shengchao Fei (Zong, 1999).

During the past decade, the profile of interpreting practitioners has become diversified with the development of varied needs of the language services industry in China. While the market for conference interpreting has been dominated by established conference interpreters based mainly in metropolises, such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, some new graduates from top-notch conference interpreting programmes are making their way into it through a market-screening process. The market for interpreting in other settings, such as legal settings (court and police) and health care settings, have also emerged in the past decade because there has a big increase of expats and foreigners working and living in China. In spite of the changes, institutional interpreters working with high-ranking officials and for high-profile political and diplomatic events are still the ones that are prominently featured in the media and published discourse on interpreting in China (see Du & Wang, 2021). For example, Ning Sun and Lu Zhang, who interpreted for the Chinese Premier's press conferences after the annual "Two Sessions," have become the two names of interpreters most widely featured by Chinese media in the past decade (Jiang, 2013).

3.6 Materials—Tools and technologies: What tools and technologies are used in interpreting?

Four articles were identified as representing the discourse on tools and technologies employed in interpreting as an important element for the social practice of interpreting.

Early discourse (e.g., S. K. Zhong, 1981) paid attention to the importance of interpreting training facilities in enabling interpreting trainees to acquire sufficient "tape hours of practice" (磁带小时), which has been regarded as a symbol for specialised training provided in professional programmes (W. H. Zhong, 2001).

In view of the latest development of artificial intelligence (AI)-powered technologies, the role of technologies has become more prominent in Chinese discourse on interpreting published in recent years. Deng and Zhong (2019) noted that information and communication technologies are being integrated into the interpreting profession and interpreter training at four levels: teaching assistance, customised development, synthetic application, and deep fusion. H. Wang and Yang (2019) provided a comprehensive discussion about the categorisation about and scope of application for interpreting technologies in the era of Artificial Intelligence. They pointed out three typical scenarios where interpreting technologies can be applied, including: technology-mediated interpreting (e.g., telephone interpreting and video-conference remote interpreting); technology-supported interpreting (e.g., corpus technology that supports interpreters in glossary preparation and smart pens that can be used to support interpreters during interpreting); and technology-generated interpreting (e.g., machine interpreting that may generate the interpretation without the human interpreter).

4. How has the social practice of interpreting evolved with the changing social environment in China?

This section examines how the economic, socio-political, and technological developments in the changing social environment have shaped the evolution of interpreting in China during the past four decades.

4.1 Late 1970s—early 1990s: A budding period of institutional interpreting activities

The late 1970s to the early 1990s is a budding period of institutional interpreting activities in China. After the PRC gained the seat in the UN in October 1971 and the UN adopted Chinese as a UN working language in 1973, which created the need for Chinese interpreting in international organisations. Also, with the formal establishment of Sino-US diplomatic relations in 1979 and China's initiation of its "Reform and Opening-up" in late 1978, there emerged the need for institutional interpreters working for China's government departments in diplomatic and commercial affairs at different levels. In 1979, the UN Training Programme for Interpreters and Translators (UTPIT, 联合国译训班) was established in the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute (the former name of Beijing Foreign Studies University before 1994). From 1979 to 1993 the programme produced nearly 100 interpreters, with many of them filling institutional interpreting posts in China's government departments and in various international organisations and China's embassies and delegations abroad (B. H. Wang & Mu, 2009; Yao & Deng, 2019). With the high prestige associated with the institutional interpreters that were in a small number, interpreting was regarded as "an elite profession" in this period (Dawrant et al., 2021).

4.2 Mid-1990s—early 2000s: A period of emerging professionalisation in interpreting and emerging identity for interpreters

From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, China deepened its reform and opening-up of which a symbolic event is China's accession to the WTO in 2001. That boosted the demand for interpreters both in governmental institutions and in the private market. The private market emerged in particular for staff interpreters employed by multinational companies and joint ventures and for freelance interpreters hired for business and trade conferences.

This is a period when professionalisation of interpreting began in China. During this period, when foreign language teaching was booming in the country, the first batch of specialised schools providing interpreting programmes were established in a few top-notch foreign language universities, including Beijing Foreign Studies University (its T&I school started in 1994), Shanghai International Studies University (T&I school started in 2003), Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (T&I programme started in 1993; T&I school started in 2005), and in University of International Business and Economics (its EU-China Interpreter Training Centre was established in 2001), Xiamen University (its interpreting programme started in early 1990s), and Beijing Language and Culture University (its interpreting programme started in late 1990s). Also, to provide credentials for interpreters in meeting the fast-growing market needs, a number of interpreting accreditation tests were developed in China in this period, of which the influential ones are the "Shanghai Interpreters Accreditation Test" (SIA) that was piloted in 1995 and the "CATTI" that was formalised by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (of the PRC) in 2003. The "National Standard (Specification for translation service—Part 2: Interpretation" was also released in 2006 (GB/T 19363.2-2006).

This is also a period when interpreters' identity began to emerge in China. With the live television broadcast of the Chinese Premiers' press conference after the annual "Two Sessions" since the late 1990s, the institutional interpreters who interpreted for these events became "celebrities" in the media and widely known to the public. Another activity that symbolises the collective identity of interpreters in China is the initiation of the "National Symposium on Interpreting" (全国口译大会) in 1996, which since then has been a biennial event for interpreting practitioners, trainers, and researchers in China.

4.3 2007 to present: Professionalisation and fast expansion of interpreting as part of the language services industry

The period from 2007 to now is a period of professionalisation and fast expansion of interpreting as part of the language services industry, which includes not only T&I services, but also localisation services, the R&D of language technology, translator and interpreter training, and language-related consultation services (Ren, 2020).

In 2007, the Academic Degrees Committee under China's State Council authorised 15 universities to launch the new programme of "Master in Translation and Interpreting" (MTI), which includes the two pathways of translation and interpreting that are designed to train professional translators and interpreters. The launching of this new postgraduate degree programme, which differed from the traditional academic-oriented programme of MA in T&I studies, is generally regarded as a milestone for professionalisation of T&I in

China. In addition to its curriculum focussing on translation or interpreting practice, its final graduation project also requires a practice-based reportage on a translation or interpreting assignment rather than a research-oriented thesis. However, after its initial provision in the first few years, the MTI programme has had a dramatic expansion, which has brought the number of MTI programmes to 253 across the country (China National Committee for MTI Education, 2019), with about a third offering the interpreting pathway.

Boosted by this boom in supply, a large language services industry has taken off in China since around 2010 (Dawrant et al., 2021), when the China International Conference on Language Service Industry was held. Although a strict gatekeeping mechanism for the interpreting profession as a whole is still lacking, most interpreting employers and clients require from interpreters at least an accreditation credential or a degree certificate in interpreter training. Though the Translators Association of China (2019) issued the *Code of Professional Ethics for Translators and Interpreters* as a nonbinding guideline for professional practice and the Interpreters Committee was formed under the Translators Association of China in 2016, the increasingly large number of MTI graduates with diluted quality has become a major concern among both interpreting practitioners and educators.

In 2020, with the sudden breakout of the global pandemic of Covid-19, conferences and events had to move online and interpreting has had to be done remotely for most of the time on remote interpreting platforms (X. M. Wang & Wang, 2021). This change has brought to the interpreting profession a new reality different from the traditional norm where interpreters are co-present with all the participants of the interpreted event. Also, AI-powered technologies related to T&I have been developing rapidly in the past few years. In April 2018, an AI-powered translation engine developed by a technology giant in China tested machine interpreting in a real-life international conference though it failed to provide an adequate or useable result (Ng, 2018). In May 2019, another language technology company in China claimed that its Chinese/English machine interpreting reached the level of CATTI Level-2, though the interpreting experimented in the press briefing turned out to be far from being accurate.[2] However, the prospect of development in AI-powered technologies along this path should not be underestimated. While remote interpreting that has been more widely practised since 2020 has made working with technologies a reality, the fast development in AI-powered technologies is bringing to the interpreting profession the big question whether humans will be replaced by machines or whether they will need to work with the machine in synergy.

5. Conclusion

Through a qualitative thematic and content analysis of the academic discourse on interpreting published by interpreting trainers, researchers, and practitioners in China during the past four decades, this study has demonstrated how the conceptualisation, representation, and perception about the social practice of interpreting have evolved there. With an adapted three-element model informed by social practice theory as the analytic framework, the elements of competences, meanings, and materials of the interpreting activity in different periods have been identified and compared.

As seen from the analysed discourse on the elements of competences and practitioners, the social practice of interpreting in China was represented in the early 1980s mainly in the form of conference interpreting conducted by the few elite institutional interpreters. In the mid-1990s, interpreting was formalised as training courses in a few foreign language universities. After that, interpreters' identities began to emerge in public media when high-profile political events were broadcast live on television. Credential examinations about the interpreting practice was piloted in the mid-1990s and formalised as accreditation testing for the profession in early 2000s. With the demand rising for specialised training of interpreters related to the growing need of diversified interpreting services after China's entry to the WTO, formal institutionalisation of interpreting as a formal programme (专业) and interpreting studies as a (sub)discipline in China's higher education were realised in 2007 when the MTI programmes were approved to launch by the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council in China. Driven by the fast growth of interpreting programmes in China since then, there has been a boom of more systematic conceptualisation of practical knowledge and professional skills and of their training.

As seen from the analysed discourse on the constituents of the element of meanings, in terms of rules about the social practice of interpreting, trainers, researchers, and practitioners in China tried to identify prescriptive standards and criteria before early 2000s and explored more nuanced assessment methods after that. More recently, the role of actual norms in professional practices has been examined based on authentic interpreting corpora and on survey data, and code of practice and professional ethics have been discussed in a more explicit manner. The role of interpreters, which was perceived to be subordinate and passive in serving politics by early practitioners working in governmental institutions, has changed towards more communication- and target-audience-oriented. More academic discourse was also published on the active agency of interpreters' roles, especially in liaison/dialogue and court interpreting.

Through an examination of the economic, socio-political, and technological developments in China during the past four decades, the evolution of interpreting in three periods, including the late 1970s to early 1990s, the mid 1990s to early 2000s, and 2007 to the present, are identified and the role of the changing environment in shaping interpreting as a social practice is revealed. As seen from the analysis and discussion, the past four decades has witnessed a professionalisation process for the social practice of interpreting in China, during which representative practitioners, scholars and educators, training institutions, accreditation bodies have acted as important "internal players" (Boéri, 2015). According to Weiss-Gal and Welbourne (2008), the following eight aspects can be seen as indicative of a profession: (a) public recognition of professional status, (b) professional monopoly over specific types of work, (c) professional autonomy of action, (d) possession of a distinctive knowledge base, (e) professional education, (f) an effective professional organisation, (g) codified ethical standards, and (h) remuneration reflecting professional standing. As seen from the analysis in this study, the social practice of interpreting in China embodies all the above aspects of professionalisation now, strongly in terms of criteria (d)–(h) and still relatively weakly in terms of criteria (a)–(c).

It is worth mentioning that as all the questions explored under the three sets of elements in the analytic framework are also essential themes of interpreting studies, which are relevant to the epistemology of interpreting, interpreting as skills/competence, interpreting as process, interpreting as product, and interpreting as practice and profession

(Pöchhacker, 2004), this study can also be seen as an attempt to systematise Chinese discourse on interpreting for theoretical construction. To this end, it provides a useful overview about the discourse of interpreting studies in China, which might not be readily accessible to scholars outside China because it was published in Chinese.

As for the limitation of the study, it should be acknowledged that the scope of data selection in this article only serves the purpose of providing a bird's eye overview on how the different elements of the social practice of interpreting have been represented by published discourse on interpreting in China. For this purpose, only those journal articles that are relevant to, and representative of, the three elements are included in the data analysis. Also, as this descriptive analysis is intended to present the themes identified from the content of the journal articles, which have contributed to the evolution of interpreting (and its training) in China in different historical periods, it has not been able to cover all the articles that might be valuable in other academic terms. In terms of further study, it will be meaningful to expand the scope of analysis from the representative ones to all the journal articles and conduct quantitative analysis to reveal the broader themes for each sub-element in the analytic model.

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Notes

1. The CSSCI and CORE indexes are the indicators of quality academic journals in China. The "Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index" (CSSCI) is developed by the Chinese Social Sciences Research Evaluation Centre based in Nanjing University. The "Index of Core Journals of China" (CORE) is developed by the Library of Peking University. Most of the 14 journals in the database of the present study are listed in both indexes.
2. https://www.sohu.com/a/316105633_116778.

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Biography

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