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Chinese language learning and teaching in Dutch-speaking universities: contexts and challenges

Panel: Chinese language learning and teaching in European countries: past and present

In this presentation, we aim to offer an analytical sketch of the contexts and challenges of Chinese language learning and teaching (CLLT) in Dutch-speaking universities, focusing on “hogescholen”: universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands and Flemish Belgium. We locate CLLT in important and transitional contexts. CLLT has been an integral part of the long and rich disciplinary tradition of Sinology and China Studies in Dutch-speaking universities, notably in Leiden (NL) and Leuven (BE) where CLLT serves as an important means to access and advance knowledge about China/Chinese as a distinct geographic, cultural and racial/ethnic entity. Like in some other European higher education, CLLT falls within the paradigm of Area Studies and the training of scientific intellectuals par excellence, with a particular perception on the function and pedagogy of (Chinese) language. Recently CLLT began to emerge as a new subject in “hogescholen”, as an extension and supplement to traditional university education and, more, as a response to the need to provide highly trained professional workers with practical skills and knowledge (notably multilingual intercultural business communication) that are relevant and applicable to contemporary socioeconomic contexts. The “applied” nature and the “bestaansrecht” (the right of existence) required of CLLT provision by educational policies and realities places CLLT in a new and challenging context. This calls for twofold re-contextualization of CLLT: on the one hand, a renewed understanding of China and Chinese in a globalizing world and, on the other hand, an up-to-date pedagogical toolkit to adjust and deliver the CLLT curriculum as applied education. Both require a paradigmatic shift in terms of the “social turn” of CLLT in which communicative skills need to be placed at the heart of its provision. We illustrate educational challenges posed by this shift in concrete ways, using our own hogeschool as an example. We reflect on the operational potentials and constraints of moving into a communication-oriented curriculum from the perspectives of the teachers and the students. In a context of applied education, both teachers and students are required to adapt to new roles in an environment where the Chinese curriculum is more and more part of a larger integrated whole of formerly parallel learning lines.