

# The past, present and future of Chinese MA theses in Interpreting Studies: A scientometric survey

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## Abstract

This paper takes a scientometric approach to examining one of Chinese Interpreting Studies' (CIS) most productive sources of research, MA theses, with the aim of answering the following questions: How has the discipline changed over time? What fields and theories influence it? And what are its most common research themes? The study's comprehensive corpus of nearly 1,300 Chinese-language theses addresses a data-based limitation faced by earlier scholars. A range of state-of-the-art statistical techniques have made it possible to detect patterns in CIS that are difficult to tease out by human hand and eye alone. The field has grown rapidly in recent years and is now producing a steady and consistent stream of research: the majority of students in China draw inspiration from theories within Translation Studies, but no particular theories or topics have grown more popular over time. Despite this consistency, CIS remains a complex and dynamic field of academic enquiry.

**Keywords:** scientometrics, MA theses, Chinese Interpreting Studies

## 1. Introduction

Though interpreting as a distinct profession dates back centuries, it is only in the 1990s that the term 'Interpreting Studies' was coined (Pöchhacker & Shlesinger, 2002). China's involvement in the international diplomatic arena began in 1979 when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs signed an agreement with the secretariat of the United Nations by which Beijing's Foreign Studies University (BFSU) would provide the UN's various offices with professional interpreters from 1981 onwards. To that end a total of 103 graduates were trained to Diploma (Master's equivalent) level at BFSU. The subject began to be treated as an academic discipline in its own right in China around 1993 (Wang, 2006).

To help meet the booming demand for interpreters, the Ministry of Education introduced the Master's Degree in Translation and Interpreting in 2007, ensuring that the subject could now assume an independent existence of its own rather than be a mere component of Applied Linguistics and Foreign Literature (ALFL). This strategic decision has enabled China to establish itself as something of a powerhouse of contributions to the field of Interpreting Studies, as

evidenced by the sheer number of publications documented in the CIRIN bulletin: for instance, in the last issue of 2013 (number 46), 31 of the 54 journal articles were written by Chinese scholars.

This paper examines one of its most productive sources of academic enquiry, MA theses, which give students their first flavor of structured research. Generally speaking, MA theses are not highly considered in academia, but as noted repeatedly in Gile's CIRIN Bulletin editorials (Gile, 2015), they are the result of a great deal of work, more often than not of an empirical rather than theoretical nature, and therefore should not necessarily be discounted as sources of original material and data. Since the majority of their authors do not intend to take up careers as academics but are interested primarily in the practicalities of professional interpreting, their thesis work is often the only research project they ever undertake. It would be a disservice to the interpreting community entirely to disregard their contributions to the body of literature on the subject. Further, the focus of these novices on applied interpreting rather than theoretical enquiry may lend their work a practical value lacking in more traditional studies.

The present study, which forms part of a larger ongoing examination of research publications in China, focuses on MA theses to uncover trends in their production, their major themes and theoretical influences, and the research methods employed by graduate researchers. The data contained in and analysis of this particular corpus will lay the groundwork for future investigations into journal articles and doctoral dissertations — other important components of Interpreting Studies. The core subjects of this paper are the growth in production of MA theses, their distribution over Chinese tertiary educational institutions, and their most popular topics and methodologies. Further exploration of other aspects will be undertaken later with other methodologies, including citation analyses.

## 2. Previous literature

Various scholars have reviewed the evolution of Chinese Interpreting Studies (CIS) before, among them Liu Heping (2001), who traced the discipline's development by studying the biennial National Conference and International Forum on Interpreting, which held its first session in 1996. As CIS has gained momentum, this event has attracted more participants and featured more diverse themes. Liu called on her colleagues to follow the trends prevalent in

Western interpreting research. Following in Liu's footsteps, Liu Shaolong and Wang Liuqi (2007) also studied the landscape of CIS. Instead of focusing on conference proceedings, they sampled 161 articles published over the previous decade, selecting 30 to study in depth. They concluded that in comparison with those used in the West, research methodologies favored by Chinese scholars were 'subjective and monotonous', and that there were no centralized themes. Li Xiangdong (2007) and Tang Fang (2010) took a similar approach but used a larger sample size from articles published in China's premier journals. The conclusion they came to was a different one: they found that not only was the quantity of CIS articles increasing but their quality was improving.

In addition to conference proceedings and journal articles, MA theses are another important source of data that contribute to the advancement of knowledge in CIS. Zhao Nan (2009) employed a data-set of 229 theses to focus on the research methods adopted by Chinese MA students over the previous decade. She found that because of student researchers' lack of relevant training, a large number of theses fell down on methodological issues such as sampling, material selection, testing conditions and quantitative analysis.

### 3. Research methodology

For the present study a research methodology was devised that would allow the author to build upon earlier scholars' works on CIS (Liu, 2005; Liu & Wang, 2007; Tang, 2010) and answer some of the questions they left open. To examine how the discipline's major theoretical influences and themes change over time, time-series analyses were conducted; trends in its methodologies, with particular emphasis on empirical research, were also explored.

This section outlines the questions studied in this paper, and details the methods and procedures used for data collection and labeling, which proved vital in ensuring that this analysis of CIS literature was both systematic and comprehensive.

#### 3.1. Research questions

The research questions were designed to gather descriptive and inferential statistics on MA theses in CIS and are divided into two groups. The first group provides an overview of the discipline using basic scientometrics: What are its major theoretical influences? What are its

most commonly addressed memes and keywords? What varieties of interpreting are most studied by MA students? What research methodologies do they employ? The second group explores the trends of various aspects of CIS: How has the discipline grown over the past two decades? How do its theoretical influences and themes change over time? What patterns can be discerned in MA students' choice of interpreting mode to study? Is empirical research becoming more or less popular over time?

### **3.2. Data collection**

Since a large and representative sample of data is necessary for drawing valid and meaningful conclusions in research projects with a great range of data variation, every effort was made to procure, analyze and investigate a broad range of theses in Interpreting Studies produced at various universities in both Mainland China and Taiwan. A corpus of nearly 1,300 MA theses from both areas was analyzed for the present study.<sup>1</sup> The comprehensive — near exhaustive — size of the collection removed from the present work a data-based limitation that was present in previous exploratory studies such as Zhao's of 2009.

### **3.3. Description of thesis labeling**

Traditionally scholars relied on the keywords supplied by papers' authors in their abstracts to investigate various features of and connections between scholarly works (Yi & Choi, 2012; Yoon, Lee & Lee, 2010; Hofer, Smejkal, Bilgin & Wuehrer, 2010). However, this approach had its limitations: insufficiencies in the authors' labeling sometimes resulted in scholars missing 'hidden' examples of the very thing they were looking for. In addition, there was the danger of generating too many categories, which could result in the details distracting researchers from the big picture.

To avoid pitfalls such as these the author studied the actual content of each and every thesis rather than relying solely on the authors' keywords. At the same time each thesis was labeled for content in two complementary ways, theoretical influences and memes, which can be thought of

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<sup>1</sup> To collect the relevant information the author used official Chinese repositories of electronic theses (CNKI, Wanfang, the National Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations in Taiwan) and interlibrary loans, as well as universities' thesis archives.

as the raw materials and finished products of research.

### 3.3.1. Definition of theoretical influences

To build the corpus that would form the basis of the analysis, the first step was to tag all references to existing theories which formed the basis of each thesis; specifically, the literature review section of each thesis was examined (when the full text was available)<sup>2</sup> to identify the theories that were discussed in detail. When certain theories or concepts were only mentioned in passing, they were excluded from the analysis. That done, a coding regime was created which consisted of six categories, each with its own sub-categories. For examples of some of the theories identified and how they were subsequently assigned to the various categories see Table 1.

| Categories | Sub-categories    | Theory name                    | Representative publication        | Description  |
|------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Cognition  | Neuroscience      | Cowan's Model                  | Wilson & Cowan, 1972              | A model that describes the interaction between excitatory and inhibitory neurons |
|            | Cognitive Science | Wechsler Memory Scale          | Wechsler, 2009                    | A theory that describes various categories of human personality                  |
|            | Psychology        | Five-Factor Personality Theory | Matthews, Deary, & Whiteman, 2009 | A theory that describes various dimensions of an individual's                    |

<sup>2</sup> Of the 1,290 theses in the data set, 70 were available only as abstracts; 22 were embargoed, i.e. only their titles were available; and one was collected through citation analysis. For the first group the theoretical influences were tagged based on review of the abstracts; for the second and third groups the author inferred the theories from the titles.

|                             |                             |                                     |                                |   |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
|                             |                             |                                     |                                | personality   |
| <b>Language</b>             | Linguistics                 | Grammatical Metaphor                | Halliday, 1994                 | The use of a different grammatical construction to conjure up a different meaning |
|                             | Second language acquisition | Levelt's Language Acquisition Model | Levelt, Roelofs, & Meyer, 1999 | A model that delineates the stages in acquiring a language                        |
| <b>Communication Theory</b> |                             | Lasswell's Model of Communication   | Lasswell, 1948                 | A linear model that describes the communication process                           |
|                             |                             | Noisy Channel Model                 | Brill & Moore, 2000            | A system for finding the right word when a wrong one has been produced            |
| <b>Translation</b>          |                             | Function Plus Loyalty               | Nord, 2007                     | A guiding principle for faithful and culturally sensitive translation             |
| <b>Peoples and Cultures</b> |                             | Jauss' Esthetics Of Reception       | Rush, 1996                     | A theory that emphasizes the reader's perception of beauty in the text            |

|                      |            |                            |                        |   |
|----------------------|------------|----------------------------|------------------------|---|
| <b>Miscellaneous</b> | Philosophy | Family Resemblance Theory  | Wittgenstein, 1953     | A philosophical idea that argues things are connected by overlapping similarities |
|                      | Education  | Learning Motivation Theory | Oxford & Shearin, 1994 | A theory that explains the hows and whys of motivating learners                   |

Table 1: Categories of theoretical influences

### 3.3.2. Definition of memes

CIS authors investigate a wide array of subject matters in their theses. To identify them the author began by giving the theses a first pass in search of a large number of keywords describing the topics addressed in each. These keywords were then grouped into the major themes of CIS employing an adaptation of the classification scheme used by Gile (2000); the adapted scheme was conceptually simple and minimized the possibility of overlap between categories. The following meme categories were created (see Table 2) — examples of selected thesis titles<sup>3</sup> or research questions follow each:<sup>4</sup>

| <b>Meme</b>     | <b>Examples</b>   |
|-----------------|---|
| <b>Training</b> | What is the present situation of intercultural communication training for English majors in the universities in China? (Feng Xue, 2012) |
|                 | Can training on specific noise-abating techniques and skills effectively improve  |

<sup>3</sup> For the sake of authenticity, no editing was made to the English titles created by the original authors.

<sup>4</sup> It came as something of a surprise to find that a large number of theses had no specific research question: many gave historical overviews of the field, or a meta-analysis of existing literature. In such cases, the title was taken to represent the most succinct description of the central theme of the thesis.

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
|                       | interpreting quality in terms of fidelity of the output product? (Ma Hui, 2009)   |
| <b>Professional</b>   | <p>What are the differences between the interpretation users' expectations towards monologic mode and dialogic mode respectively? Why? (Tang Lingling, 2011)</p> <p>An initial investigation of interpreters' work values and job satisfaction in Taiwan (Chen Kaiyi, 2008)</p>   |
| <b>Language</b>       | <p>Coping with English Accent in English-Chinese Interpreting (Zhao Zhongqing, 2012)</p> <p>The Exploration and Analysis of the Interpreting Strategies from the Perspective of Meta-discourse Theory (Zhang Qing, 2012)</p>  |
| <b>Socio-cultural</b> | <p>A Study on Handling Culturally Loaded Words in Chinese-English Consecutive Interpretation (Jin Yuexi, 2011)</p> <p>Redefining the specific role of liaison interpreters (Bao Jing, 2009)</p>   |
| <b>Cognitive</b>      | <p>An analysis of information storage and retrieval process in consecutive interpretation from the perspective of long term working memory (Zhang Yanyan, 2009)</p> <p>Construction of idealized cognitive models in simultaneous interpreting (Li Bin, 2007)</p> <p>The schema theoretic approach to interpretation and interpretation teaching (Gao Ying, 2008)</p> |
| <b>Miscellaneous</b>  | <p>The Philosophical and Aesthetic Meanings of Interpretation (Shen Ao, 2010)</p> <p>An Analysis of Intern Practice in Twenty-Sixth Shenzhen Universiade (Liu Wei, 2012)</p>  |

Table 2: Categories of memes



### 3.4. Definition of interpreting types

There are many different ways to divide interpreting into types. To obtain a comprehensive overview of the types most actively studied by Chinese scholars, the following classification schemes were created:

- Working modes: consecutive, simultaneous and signed language interpreting, sight translation
- Social contexts:<sup>5</sup> business, technical, diplomatic, court, religious,<sup>6</sup> healthcare, conference, escort (aka liaison), and other types of community interpreting
- Miscellaneous: whisper, telephone and TV interpreting etc.

### 3.5. Definition and types of empirical research

Broadly speaking, there are two types of research: empirical and theoretical. For the purposes of this study, an empirical study is characterized as one based principally on data collected from observations or experiments rather than one which analyzes theories. It should be noted that such data need not be quantitative, but can be qualitative in nature. Because of the special nature of research in Interpreting Studies, working definitions were created for different types of empirical study:

**Experimental:** The experimenter controls the environment and sets a specific task for participants to perform.

**Observational:** Involves the observation of phenomena or behaviors without control or manipulation of the environment, with the aim of drawing conclusions from the effects under study.

**Questionnaire-based:** Relies on the collection of data by means of a set of questions or prompts

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<sup>5</sup> This classification describes how individuals from different social and linguistic backgrounds interact with one another for a specific purpose (Pöchhacker, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Religious interpreting refers to those activities which take place in spiritual settings such as church services, confessionals, guided vacations to holy sites and marriage ceremonies (The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 2007).

given to study participants.

Interview-based: Data is gathered by means of conversations with subjects.

Ethnological: Data is collected in a social group by means of observation and interviews.

Theoretical studies, by contrast, are based on an existing literature of ideas and theories: they may expand on them, apply them in new ways, or even seek to refute them.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Overview of CIS MA theses**

Having defined the terms, in this section they are used to provide an overview of MA theses on the subject of CIS, with the aim of answering some fundamental questions: What are the major theoretical influences? What are the most commonly addressed topics? What research methodologies are employed?

#### **4.1.1. Influences on CIS**

The existing theories most referred to in MA theses are as follows: the Translation category leads with 35.4% of the total, followed by Cognition (28.5%), Language (15.6%), Communication Theory (9.3%), and Peoples and Cultures (7.6%); Miscellaneous brings up the rear with 3.5%. It is only natural that influences from the translation field should emerge on top since translation and interpreting are in essence both about rendering one language into another, and Interpreting Studies is generally considered a specialty within the field of Translation Studies.

As the faculty members of most Chinese universities' interpreter training programs — themselves often offshoots from language and literature courses — come from backgrounds in those disciplines (Zhang, 2011), one might reasonably expect instructors to direct students' theses on subjects which fall within their areas of expertise. Yet it is interesting to note that the influence from Cognition outweighs that from Language-related fields such as linguistics and second language acquisition. A possible explanation for this counter-intuitive finding is that the boom in interdisciplinary studies in the West is starting to spread to the CIS community: the majority of citations in Cognition-related theses are from Western articles, and it would appear

that familiarity with this corner of the literature is driving this trend. An example of how Chinese MA authors apply Western cognition theories in their theses is Zhang Yanyan's thesis from 2009, in which she drew inspiration from the long-term working memory theory proposed by Ericsson and Kintsch (1995) to explain how consecutive interpreters can hold information of a few minutes' duration in their memories.

#### 4.1.2. Memes of CIS

The data revealed that Training is the most popular meme in MA theses with 43% of the total, followed by Language (18%) and Cognitive issues (16%). Socio-cultural (11%), Miscellaneous (9%) and Professional (3%) matters make up the rest. Interestingly, nearly half of all students are attracted to Training-related issues. Gile (2000) points out that in the West, where the interpreting community is comprised mostly of instructors, making the subject of training understandably popular, writings tend to be didactic and based on personal experience. By contrast, Chinese students, who generally lack that experience, often produce in their writings empirical data which serves to back up their Western colleagues' work. For example, Liu Hui (2004), Zhu Ling (2010), Lin Yingjun (2011) and 23 other students have conducted experimental or observational studies to investigate the use of deverbalization — a popular Western approach in interpreter training first introduced by French researcher Danica Seleskovitch — as a strategy in interpreting.

It is understandable that Language is the second most popular meme in CIS given the importance of mastering a second language for success in interpreting. Further, Chinese students are more likely to be preoccupied with language-related matters in that they face far more such challenges than their Western colleagues: the English they bring with them to university is often in serious need of improvement, and they are required to work in both directions.

Cognitive and Socio-cultural issues are the other two moderately popular research memes. Firstly, students rightly realize that cognition is highly relevant to interpreting research (Gile, 2000). Secondly, Chinese students in particular face an undoubted problem with — and are understandably interested in — social and cultural matters: they are acutely aware that prolonged immersion in the life of a foreign country plays a crucial role in improving understanding of socio-cultural issues that might arise during interpreting (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), yet very few can afford to spend more than a month or two overseas (Setton & Guo, 2009).

Professional matters receive the least attention, probably because students have yet to experience first-hand some of the issues that interpreters routinely encounter in real-life situations. Indeed some Chinese programs, such as the Conference Interpreting course at the Shanghai International Studies University (SISU), even prohibit students from taking interpreting assignments during the course for fear that they may reinforce bad habits (or tarnish the university's reputation) before they are ready to enter the professional market. It is also interesting to note that the program at SISU offers no courses or class hours on professional ethics (AIIC, 2012). This stringent training regime would undoubtedly make it difficult for students to carry out research on this topic.

#### 4.1.3. CIS Keywords

The memes are aggregate-level objects, so an analysis was conducted of more finely-tuned keywords associated with each thesis. The top few keywords (i.e. those with the most mentions) tended toward the general: interpreting strategies (439 mentions), interpreting quality (162), interpreter training (160), interpreting techniques (126), and assessment (116). The rather less popular keywords included note-taking (80 mentions), cultural differences (63), anticipation (46), and deverbalization (44) — all concepts that are obviously of great importance in CIS research. These keywords provide the means to investigate the on-going trends of the discipline:

- Strategies/techniques: graduate students seem keen to investigate strategies to deploy in response to particular difficulties in interpreting.
- Quality and assessment: many students discuss at great length what constitutes good interpreting performance and how students should be evaluated comprehensively.
- Training: as more and more Master's in Translation and Interpreting (MTI) courses spring up all over China, it is reasonable to assume that a significant number of graduates may be particularly interested in the best methods and systems for training students to realize their full potential.

In addition, the modestly popular keywords mentioned above present another view of the CIS landscape:

- Note-taking: many beginners consider note-taking the most difficult component of CI. Numerous theses detail how to master the skill and the role it plays in an interpreter's

overall performance.<sup>7</sup>

- Cultural differences: given that the vast majority of Chinese interpreting students have no or very little exposure to a culture where their B language is spoken, it is reasonable to suppose that many may feel the need to explore the various cultural issues that arise in interpreting and ways of maximizing efficient and effective communication.
- Anticipation: there is a great deal of discussion of this topic — so vital to successful SI — from both cognitive and practical perspectives.
- Deverbalization: the popularity of this core concept of Seleskovitch's Interpretive Theory (see for example Seleskovitch, 1978) indicates that her ideas are being accepted and incorporated into numerous Chinese training programs, and many students are producing experimental or observational studies to support or refute the theory's tenets.

#### 4.1.4. Modes of interpreting in CIS

Of the 1,290 theses examined, 469 addressed consecutive interpreting (CI), 333 simultaneous interpreting (SI) and 11 sight translation (ST).<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps natural that the majority of students should prefer CI to SI because the materials for observational study are more readily available, making it an easier subject to research: the evaluation of CI performance is not constrained by the selection of venue for the experiments (a regular classroom or lab is perfectly adequate), whereas SI experiments require access to specialized booths, which is often highly restricted by the schools in question. Furthermore, notes in CI offer a glimpse into the research participants' mental processes, whereas those of SI interpreters remain entirely invisible. In addition, the TV footage of press conferences held by various government agencies, which call exclusively for CI, are widely and freely available to anyone who might like to study them. By contrast, dual-track recordings of original speeches with SI are far less easily come by. As of the date of writing (September 2014), no author has made signed language interpreting part of their graduation thesis, a situation which is entirely understandable given that to date no school in China has incorporated the subject into its regular curriculum (Wang, 2009) — this of course represents a serious stumbling-block for any student wanting to conduct systematic research into it at MA

<sup>7</sup> Of the 80 theses in which note-taking was investigated, the author classed 74% as empirical, indicating that the majority were non-prescriptive.

<sup>8</sup> Please note that the three mode totals do not add up to the overall total because many theses only addressed interpreting in general and several addressed more than one mode.

level.

It is interesting to note that only a handful of students studied ST, perhaps because it is only offered during the first year of coursework at the leading schools in China (Wang, 2009) and does not form part of the required testing material in schools' professional exams.

When the papers are analyzed according to their social contexts, the most popular research subjects are revealed to be Diplomatic (102 theses, or 8% of the total), Conference (83, or 6%), Business (67, or 5%), and Escort (63, or 5%); note that none exceeds 10% of the total. The figures would appear to indicate that these types of interpreting are the most widely used in Chinese society. By contrast, Community interpreting accounts for less than 2% of the total (22 theses); 11 of these dealt with court interpreting, two with healthcare and three with religious matters. A possible reason for this low percentage is that China has yet to become a multilingual society: though various languages and dialects are spoken in the country, the government's promotion of standard Mandarin Chinese over the past two decades has virtually eliminated barriers to communication between different ethnic and linguistic groups. However, it is worth pointing out that court interpreting accounts for no less than 50% of the Community total, which indicates that students have recognized the growing need for and importance of oral translation services in courtroom settings: as China's links with the rest of the world become closer, court interpreters are being called on to assist in resolving increasing numbers of trade and investment disputes with foreign companies.

Given the increasingly technological world we live in, it is perhaps surprising to learn that only nine theses (1%) deal with Technical interpreting, even though this is often used for China's engineering projects overseas or when foreign experts are involved with technology licensing to Chinese companies. A possible explanation for this situation is that many of the interpreters for these assignments are in-house engineers with a good command of English. This is evidenced by the fact that nearly all journal articles on technical interpreting are penned by people who have received no systematic training in interpreting.

Finally, TV and whisper interpreting also received minimal attention, with only one and four theses dedicated to those types respectively. The lack of research into TV interpreting can perhaps be ascribed to the strong resistance to it from established interpreters, who feel that the working conditions at TV stations are far from ideal for rendering quality work (Zhou, 2007). Though whisper interpreting is of undoubtable value when the proper equipment for SI is

unavailable or inappropriate, its less formal nature and the fact that it is not taught on any interpreter training programs in China may explain the scarcity of research in this area.

#### **4.1.5. Empirical research in the CIS field**

A closer examination of empirical studies revealed that 599 of the 1,290 theses, or 46%, were empirical. A further 97 (8%) were internship reports. Of the empirical total, 295 (49%) included an experiment, 230 (38%) featured an observational study, 103 (17%) involved questionnaires and 68 (11%) interviews.<sup>9</sup> A mere 7 (1%) were ethnological in nature.

It is natural that students should favor observational studies above all others. Firstly, the research methodology involved is quite straightforward: with access to a constant flow of televised press conference interpreting, students have little difficulty observing and recording spontaneous behavior, unlike in experimental conditions which, unless managed with a great deal of care and skill, can tend to affect the subjects' performances and so produce skewed results. While interpreters may not behave completely naturally in observational studies, the method's ecological validity is likely to far excel that to be derived from experimental studies. Secondly, conducting such work typically does not involve making a large financial commitment: the materials involved (paper, cassettes, etc.) cost little, and no specialized equipment is required (Gile, 1994). Of the 240 theses labelled as observational, in 61 the authors scrutinized the interpreting performances of professionals during the Chinese Premier's annual press conferences. Given that even the most seasoned researchers do not take lightly the difficulties involved in setting up experiments, it is encouraging to see so many students tackling experimental studies: the total (297) exceeds the combined total of interview- (71) and questionnaire-based (113) ones. A note of caution should be sounded, however: Tang's analysis (2010) uncovered a host of methodological problems with students' experiments, so the results should be interpreted with a degree of circumspection.

##### **4.1.5.1. Experiments in CIS**

A long-standing problem in interpreting research is that of finding suitable research participants. With this in mind, the author looked into the sample sizes and types of subjects used for the 297

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<sup>9</sup> As some theses used multiple research methodologies, the total proportions add up to more than 100%.

experimental studies:

- 8 studies used professionals
- 21 used both professionals and students
- 252 used students only
- 1 used native speakers of English with no knowledge of Chinese

The first group had sample sizes of between 3 and 20 (3, 3, 4, 4, 11, 12, 20, 20): this is indicative of how difficult it can be to find willing professionals, who are most representative of the overall interpreter population. It is interesting to note that the studies in the second group generally used 2–3 times as many students as professionals, the number of the latter ranging from just 1 up to 10. Of the two studies which managed to recruit as many as 20 professionals, one was from mainland China (Ding, 2008), the other from Taiwan (Jian, 2009).

Those studies which employed only students had a median sample size of 8, with 25% having fewer than 6; another 25% (63) had more than 20; the maximum number was 224.<sup>10</sup> However, it should be noted that those with the larger sample sizes recruited college students with no structured training in interpreting.

Nearly all the experiments analyzed were one-off studies. It is difficult to draw general conclusions from these, given the significant variations that exist between individuals (Gile, 1994): experiments should ideally be repeated with different test subjects in order to validate any conclusions drawn. It would certainly be a worthwhile endeavor for colleagues from the interpreting community to conduct a meta-analysis of similar experiments in order to consolidate the findings and make broad generalizations.

## 4.2. Trends in CIS over time

The overview presented in the previous section does not tell the complete story of CIS, since the field is neither homogenous nor static. This section addresses the latter issue, examining the discipline's development over the years, those aspects that have changed and those that have remained constant.

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<sup>10</sup> Sun Yaling's 2003 study, in which she investigated the audience's perception of SI quality, recruited 224 college students (freshmen to seniors) who were not majoring in interpreting.



#### 4.2.1. The growth of CIS

Perhaps the most notable change in CIS has been its dramatic growth over the last two decades. The first MA theses in mainland China were written in 1995 by the first class to graduate from the newly restructured Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation (GSTI) at BFSU. It continued to dominate in terms of number of theses produced until 2001, though their methods and scope were limited to non-empirical studies of the basic techniques of consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. Since 2002, as new training programs have been set up all over the country in response to ever-increasing interest from aspiring interpreters, BFSU's dominance has diminished. The overall number of theses has grown significantly, with a few newcomers such as Xiamen and Guangdong Universities standing out from the crowd of competitors as major new research centers.

To find a medium-term trend line for the years 1990–2012, a smoothing spline regression was used, with automatic detection of the degree of smoothing by generalized cross-validation. This method was chosen because it uses very few modeling assumptions (the only important tuning parameter is the degree of smoothing), but nevertheless allows for the inspection of possible medium-term trends. The same exploratory approach was used in the analyses to follow. The number of Chinese MA theses and their trend are shown in Figure 1.

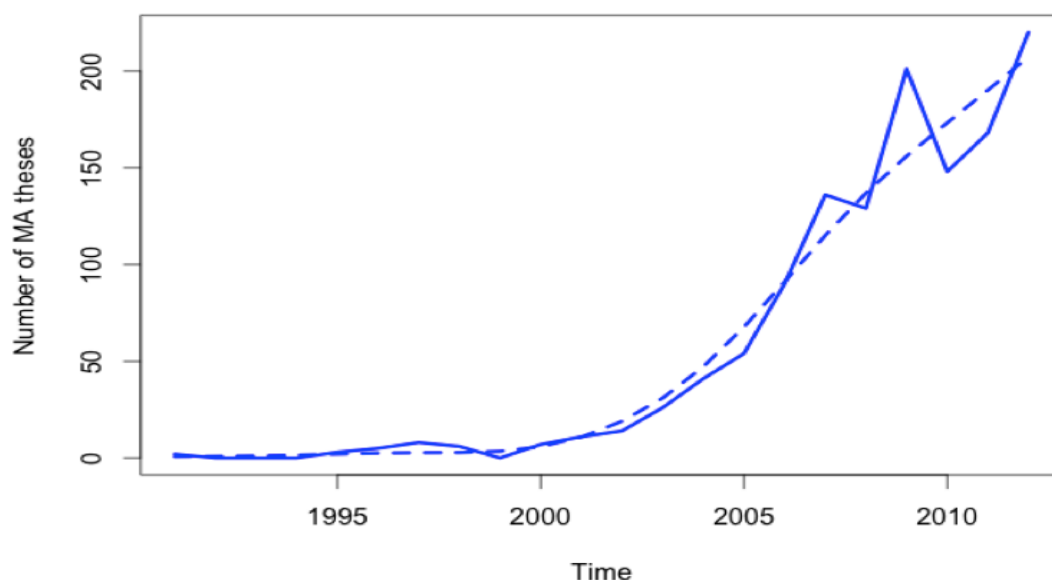


Figure 1: MA theses published each year in CIS: actual number (solid line) and trend (broken line)

From the late 1990s to around 2006 the number of Chinese MA theses experienced a period

of accelerating growth. Since then growth has declined slightly, but 2012 again saw a surge in the number of publications. The reason for this plateauing might largely be explained by the fact that fewer programs are being created and the population of students is thus stabilizing.

#### 4.2.2. Consistency of theoretical influences on CIS

To investigate the evolution of theoretical influences on MA theses, the total number of theories per thesis was counted up and divided by the total number of theses to give the numbers on the Y axis (see Figure 2), to ensure that all theses were weighted equitably, regardless of their length: those with more tags tend to have more input from different theoretical influences. For instance, it would not be reasonable to attribute the same weight to a 100-page thesis with input from ten theories as to one of 20 pages with two theoretical influences. It is evident from Figure 2 that there have been no major changes in theoretical influences on CIS over time: this may corroborate Zhang's view (2008) that the academic tradition of CIS is self-replicating and conservative.

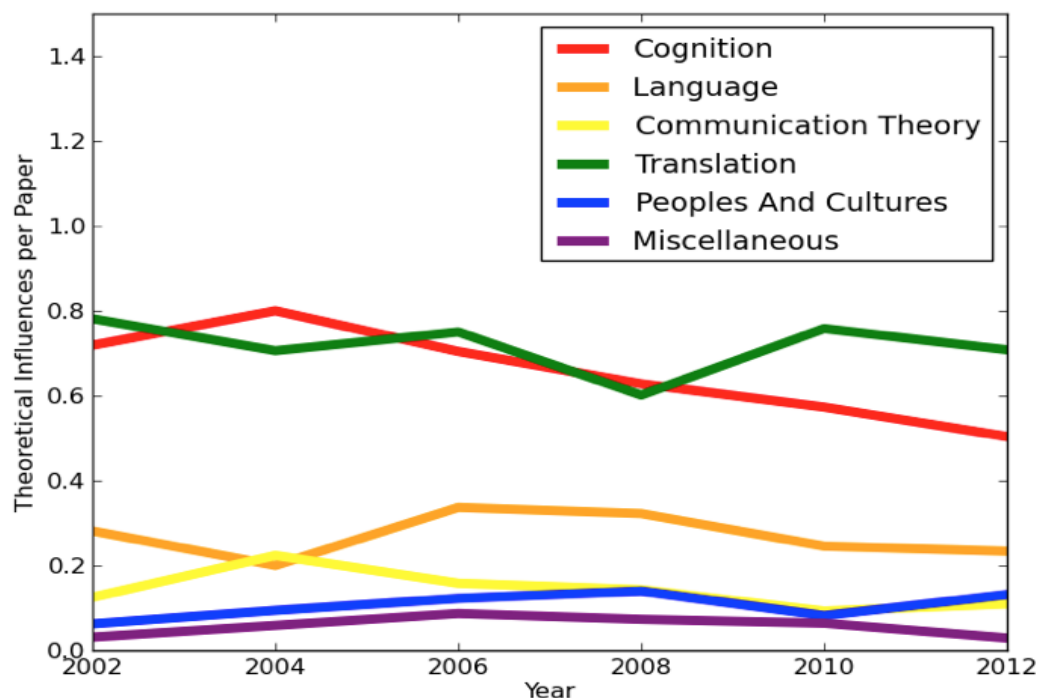


Figure 2: Theoretical influences on CIS over time

### 4.2.3. Consistency of memes in CIS

To find out how the memes evolved over time, the average number of each category of meme per thesis was plotted against publication year. Since so few theses were produced before 2002, averages before then are statistically unreliable, so Figure 3 shows data only from the years since.

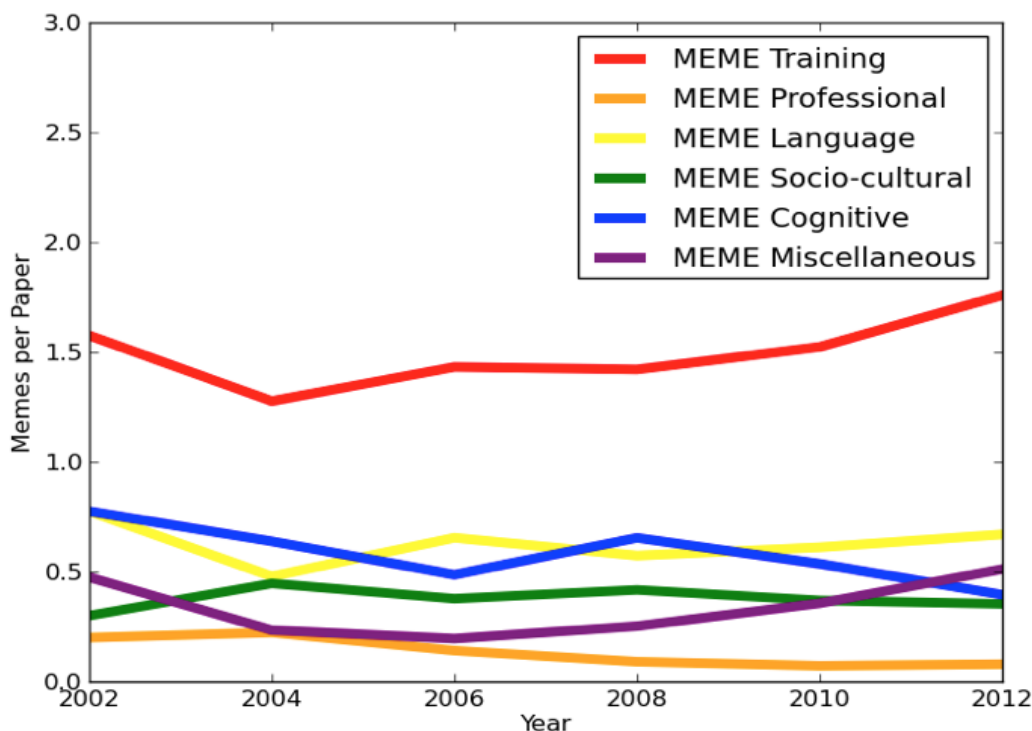


Figure 3: Average number of memes of each type per paper over time

None of the memes became particularly more or less popular over the period, a finding which is significant for the following reasons. Firstly, it illustrates that academics in CIS have been broadly convergent on its most important themes over the last ten years.

Secondly, the constancy of the figures over time may also reflect a sustained preference among students for particular topics that most capture their interest or that they can easily relate to. For instance, it is no surprise to see that Training tops the chart — a great number of MA students are given the opportunity to teach various interpreting courses organized by their schools, which are aimed at helping lower-level students to pass various certification exams, such as the China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters (CATTI) and the Shanghai Interpreter Accreditation Exam (SIAE). Through their teaching these graduate students often acquire a significant amount of training experience, so they are very likely comfortable exploring

various themes on the subject. Another possible explanation for this constancy is that, since it is the primary aim of all MA students (except those who intend to go on to pursue doctorates) to acquire practical interpreting skills, they may feel the need to minimize the amount of time spent on research for their graduation theses and so choose subjects that allow for the most convenient access to materials and test subjects.

#### 4.2.4. Variation over time of interpreting modes

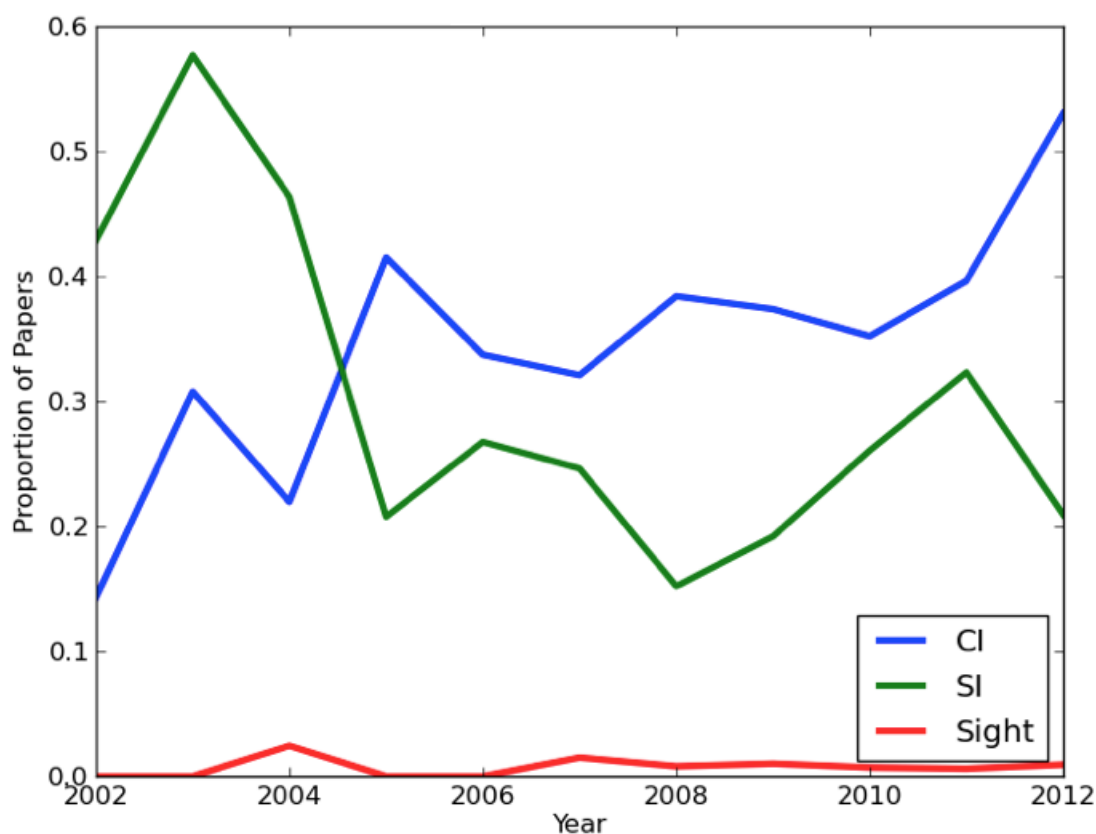


Figure 4: Working modes of interpreting in China over time

Figure 4 shows that CI replaced SI as the most studied mode in 2005, its popularity surging to a peak in 2012. This finding is somewhat counter-intuitive: before 2007, when the MTI degree was introduced, only a handful of Chinese universities (BFSU, SISU, GFSU, XU and Fu Jen Catholic University) offered courses in SI and then only as part of their conference interpreting programs; SISU, in point of fact, only began to offer the subject to its second-year MTI students much later, in 2013. One might have thought, then, that students would have opted to study the

mode — namely CI — they had easiest access to, were most familiar with, and would consequently have felt the most capable of talking about at all meaningfully. As we have seen, however, CI actually *replaced* SI as the most popular subject of study in 2005. A possible explanation for this is that before the early 2000s BFSU, with its traditional emphasis on SI, was the top producer of MA theses. Indeed, a close examination of the proportions of SI theses from BFSU over time, as shown in Table 3, confirms this hypothesis:

| Year       | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Percentage | 70%  | 100% | 80%  | 83%  | 88%  | 63%  | 62%  | 100% | 80%  | 81%  |

Table 3: Proportion of SI theses at BFSU over time

The relative stability of the figure indicates that the surge in theses from other universities has caused the shift in proportion of SI theses overall.

To gain a better understanding of which working modes were most favored at China's top five thesis-producing universities, the following table was drawn up:

| Working modes | SISU | BFSU | XU | UIBE | GFSU |
|---------------|------|------|----|------|------|
| CI            | 93   | 38   | 33 | 76   | 26   |
| SI            | 42   | 150  | 39 | 18   | 16   |
| ST            | 1    | 3    | 3  | 2    | 0    |

Table 4: Working modes at China's top five thesis-producing universities<sup>11</sup>

Of the 201 theses from BFSU, 150 focused on SI, more than the combined total from the other four universities; the proportion (75%) is also much higher than at any other of the top five, far outstripping SISU's 16%, XU's 33%, UIBE's 17%, and GFSU's 22%. This concentration on SI is hardly coincidental: BFSU has a long-standing working relationship with the United Nations (see Introduction); many of its faculty members, such as Wang Ruojin, have extensive experience working with various international organizations; and most teaching materials for the second year of its program are centered on UN interpreting. The UN and various other

<sup>11</sup> XU = Xiamen University, UIBE = University of International Business and Economics, GFSU = Guangdong Foreign Studies University. Please note that the totals per university do not tally with the totals mentioned above: this is because some theses deal with more than one interpreting mode.

international organizations only use SI for their conferences and events.

There was a marked preference among students from SISU and UIBE for theses on CI. A likely explanation for this is that the majority of students who have to produce theses on Interpreting Studies are from the English Language and Literature department, where they receive no formal training in SI: they are naturally more inclined to write about the mode they are more familiar with.

Sight translation (ST), on the other hand, received scant attention from the very beginning, and continues to do so. This is most likely due to its having long been considered an intermediary exercise between CI and SI (Weber, 1990; Agrifoglio, 2004) and much less used professionally than either, making students more inclined to focus their research on the two 'full' modes.

The analysis of how study of the various social contexts of interpreting has developed over time is shown in Figure 5. While Diplomatic has markedly dominated as a topic over the last half-dozen years, in 2012 Business, Conference and Escort were all extraordinarily strong. The data for that year were carefully scrutinized and the possibility of a labelling error ruled out. In fact the surge in Business was due to a sudden increase in the number of internship reports: 24 of the 29 theses tagged Business in 2012 took that form. Furthermore, internship reports represented 83% of the total for that year, a huge hike in the average, which stood at 11% in previous years.

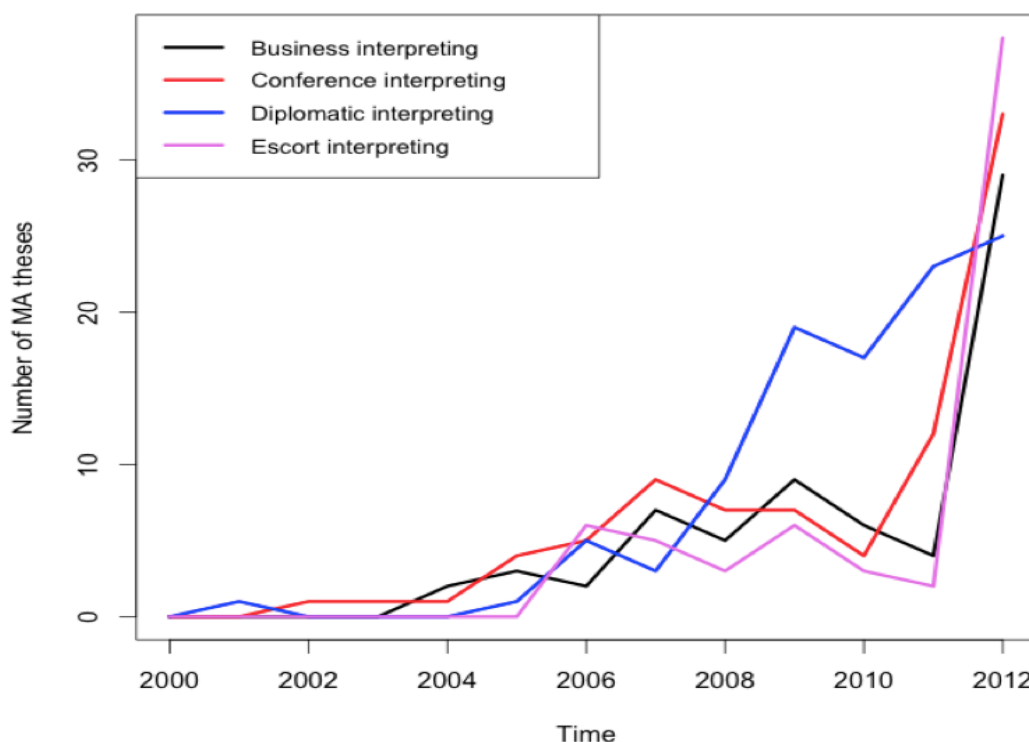


Figure 5: Social contexts of interpreting in CIS over time

By contrast, the number of theses explicitly labelled as Conference Interpreting underwent a slow but steady growth from 2002. This finding came as somewhat of a surprise: many Chinese universities label their training programs as conference interpreting courses, so one might have expected an overwhelming amount of research on the topic. A possible explanation for its relative unpopularity may be that since the majority of international conferences in China are held in a handful of cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, demand for that type of interpreting is restricted to those places and therefore less appealing to the many students elsewhere.

Theses with a focus on Diplomatic Interpreting have seen strong and solid growth since 2001. It is worth noting that the majority of them are examinations of press conferences given by the Chinese premier, during which interpreters from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs demonstrate their craft in front of millions-strong TV audiences at home and overseas. Access to suitable research subjects has always been a problem in T&I studies the world over: scholars may have an abundance of talented student interpreters at their disposal, but these will not necessarily perform in the same way as professionals (Gile, 1994), so using them may render conclusions drawn from such studies invalid. Press conferences provide the perfect opportunity for students to conduct research projects with seasoned professionals as their subjects.

Escort interpreting (EI) burst onto the scene in 2006, but seems to have been losing momentum ever since. EI is the most frequently used interpreting service in the Chinese market but it has a somewhat low professional status and level of remuneration, which may explain why so many students shy away from delving into this subject area.

Unfortunately, there was insufficient data to draw any conclusions about trends in research into Community Interpreting in CIS. However, as China's economy becomes increasingly intertwined with the rest of the world, many more foreigners will undoubtedly visit China for business or pleasure: this is likely to drive up the demand for Community Interpreting services, which is in turn likely to result in a significant increase in the number of published studies of this type of interpreting.

#### **4.2.5. Variation over time of empirical research and internship reports in CIS**

It has come to be felt by the CIS community that the amount of empirical research carried out in China needs to be increased, given the important role it plays in validating or refuting instructors' ideas, and the much-needed rigor it brings to the development of Interpreting Studies as a scientific discipline (Zhang, 2012). To examine whether the amount has indeed begun to rise, Figure 6 was created, with a solid line plotting the proportion of theses that were empirical each year from 2002 onward — there were fewer than 20 empirical theses prior to that year, making the earlier averages less statistically reliable. In addition, a smoothing spline was used to project the growth of empirical studies in the near future, illustrated with a dotted line on the graph. The smoothing spline technique automatically trades off trend-detection and natural variability in data: in this case it did not detect nonlinearity for the data, hence the straight line. This line should be understood as the best first-order approximation to the true trend of the proportion of empirical theses over the time shown. The negative trend in the proportion of empirical theses during this time was only very slight, and might not necessarily continue in the future.



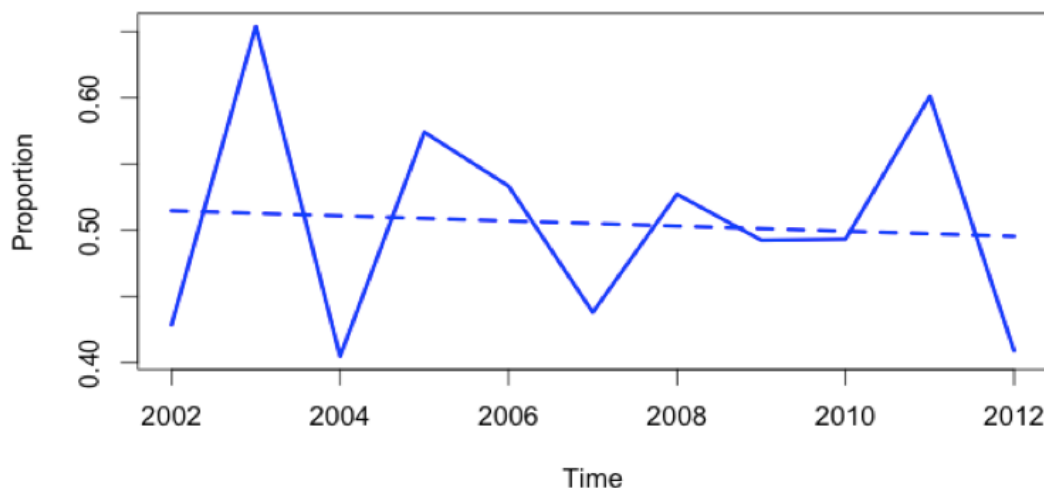


Figure 6: Proportion of empirical theses over time (solid line), and trend (broken line)

The mean proportion of empirical theses is around the 50% mark, ending with a sharp decline in 2012, the sharpest since 2003/4; this is remarkable given that the total number of theses has risen so sharply, from just 42 in 2004 to 220 in 2012. Though a gradual increase in the proportion of empirical theses had been expected, Figure 6 clearly shows that it is most likely not increasing. Of the 658 non-empirical theses, 97 took the form of internship reports, a trend set in motion by the creation of the MTI. There is a growing consensus in Chinese academia that the MTI should be profession-oriented, just as are MBAs from business schools. It seems, from a review of T&I curricula at various schools in China (Wang, 2009), that graduate students receive no preparation in thesis-writing, hence the allowing of internship reports in lieu of theses.

| University   | No. of Internship Reports |
|--|---------------------------|
| University of International Business and Economics | 82                        |
| Shanghai International Studies University          | 5                         |
| Shandong University                                | 3                         |
| Beijing Foreign Studies University                 | 2                         |
| Xiamen University                                  | 1                         |
| Hunan University                                   | 1                         |
| Dalian Maritime University                         | 1                         |
| Jilin University                                   | 1                         |
| Guangxi Normal University                          | 1                         |

Table 5: Universities that have produced internship reports

The data showed that the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE) in Beijing produced the bulk of the internship reports, followed at a great distance by Shanghai International Studies University (SISU). Of the 82 theses from UIBE, 90% were produced in 2012 alone. The European Union runs, in partnership with that university, a highly selective interpreter training program which is entirely separate from the MTI. Graduates can be awarded a diploma in Conference Interpreting in conjunction with a master's degree, dependent on their having passed China's Graduate Record Exam (GRE). In 2012 the program produced fewer than ten graduates, meaning that the overwhelming majority of UIBE's internship reports were produced by students on the MTI course.

#### 4.2.5.1. Experimental trends

The author was interested in exploring trends in experimental studies which use students as research participants, especially with regard to sample sizes. Since 2003 there has been little change in the mean number of participants per study, with an average of 15. (Note that the figures for 2001 and 2002 are less reliable, because the number of student experiments in those years was very low.)

Despite the need for large sample sizes in experimental studies, there is no trend to show that this need has been transformed into a reality — the data shows that relatively modest samples are still used for most studies. Students are well aware of the importance of having the right sample sizes for their studies, but the availability and accessibility of appropriate research participants has long been a problem for those involved in interpreting studies, with many likely candidates reluctant to put their performances under the spotlight (Gile, 1994). Numerous student researchers recruit their classmates for their experiments: their participation is relatively easily obtained given that they too probably have experiments to perform and theses to write — mutual cooperation often wins the day.

| Year | Mean number of student participants in experimental studies |
|------|---|
| 2001 | 45  |
| 2002 | 92  |
| 2003 | 6.9   |
| 2004 | 8   |
| 2005 | 10.9  |
| 2006 | 16.1  |
| 2007 | 15.6  |
| 2008 | 22.5  |
| 2009 | 17.8  |
| 2010 | 19.9  |
| 2011 | 15  |
| 2012 | 16  |

Table 6: Mean number of student participants in experimental studies over time

## 5. Conclusion

The research conducted in this paper presents a picture of a field that has grown rapidly over the

last decade. The analysis suggests, however, that this expansion is nearing its end and evolving into a phase of steady development. A comparison between the growth of theses and other types of literature in CIS would be an interesting future direction for research in this field. The majority of journal articles are produced by established academics while MA theses are written by graduate students: To what extent might the two bodies of literature have similar theoretical influences and subject matters? Is the proportion of empirical research in journal articles truly lower than in MA theses, as Gile found in his preliminary study of conference interpreting literature (2006)?

In a study of 2009 Zhao Nan found that in his sample the proportion of theoretical was much higher than that of empirical studies, but the present study has shown that the proportions are roughly half and half, indicating that awareness of the importance of data-driven research among Chinese graduate students has increased since then. MA-level research in CIS has changed in some unforeseen ways, most notable among them being that, with the emergence of internship reports, the proportion of empirical research seems not to be on the increase, and that CI has replaced SI as the most studied interpreting mode. Given the increased popularity of MTI and BTI courses in China, we might reasonably predict an ever-rising number of internship reports coupled with a continuing diminution in the proportion of empirical research. At the same time, MA thesis work has, in other ways, remained consistent: the majority of Chinese students draw inspiration from theories within Translation Studies, but no particular theories or topics have grown more popular over time. While China has produced an abundance of MA theses over the years, the West too — in particular France, Spain and Italy — has generated a significant amount of literature on Interpreting Studies. A future comparative study between East and West would help put China's emergence as a powerhouse of Interpreting Studies into a wider international perspective. The Chinese discipline has shown a remarkable spurt of growth over the last two decades and remains a complex and dynamic field of academic enquiry; its future development, and the discoveries yet to be made in it, are to be looked forward to with keen anticipation.

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