

Vocation in the Ivory Tower: A Personal Reflection on Christian Service and Secular Academics

Don Snow
Duke Kunshan University
Kunshan, Jiangsu Province, China

Abstract

This paper was originally presented in March 2017 at the plenary session of the Christians in English Language Teaching (CELT) conference at Seattle Pacific University. Dr. Snow reflects on the importance of academic research at different stages of his career as a TESOL educator. He encourages all Christians in TESOL to reflect and consider their own calling and the place of academic research.

Key words: vocation, academic research, professional development

Introduction

The specific issue I will talk about today has to do with academic research in the lives of Christian English teachers. This is obviously most relevant to those of us who teach in universities and, to a greater or lesser degree, are in a world where we may face at least some pressure to engage in research and publishing. But underlying this is the larger issue of vocation, which is relevant to all Christian English teachers – and all Christians.

For many of the things we do in our teaching lives, it is fairly easy to see how they overlap with various aspects of Christian mission and calling. For example, through our work as English teachers we often have the opportunity to serve students, including many who are relatively disadvantaged in one way or another. We also have many opportunities to be a witness for our faith, either directly and explicitly or indirectly through the example we present in our lives. We have the opportunity to engage in peace-building by teaching skills that help students interact more smoothly and harmoniously with people from other countries and cultures. And I could go on for quite a long time about these – perhaps even a book... I suppose my real point here is that we are quite blessed to be in a profession where so many aspects of our daily work can and do overlap with our calling as Christians in such clear ways.

However, when it comes to academic research, finding such overlaps can be more challenging, especially if you are doing research on a topic that has little or nothing to do with Christian faith. The problem arises as we need to make decisions about competing priorities in

our professional and personal lives – how much time should we spend on what? Should I spend large amounts of time on a research and publication project that doesn't seem to have any particular tie to Christian mission? Shouldn't I devote as much time as possible to tasks that will clearly and fairly quickly produce positive outcomes related to the Christian faith, to making the world a better place, and/or improving the lives of our students?

Here I want to make the issue sharper by taking you on a short detour into one part of my research life, talking with you a little about diglossia and the rise of written Chinese vernaculars. Bear with me. You may remember the term *diglossia* from a sociolinguistics course or textbook – or perhaps not. The basic idea is that many societies are multilingual in the sense that more than one language plays a significant role in the life of the society, and one pattern often found in multilingual societies – or at least that often used to be found – is called diglossia. In a diglossic society, there are two (or possibly more) languages that play an important role. One of these, called the “low” language, is the language people normally speak in daily life – at home, in the market, in daily work interactions. The other, called the “high” language, is a prestigious ancient language that is not used for normal conversation, but is used for formal occasions, perhaps religious rituals, and often in education. In a diglossic society, most or all reading and writing is done in the high language; in fact, the low language may not have a written form at all.

This may all sound a little unfamiliar and perhaps even a bit weird because most modern societies are not diglossic; instead, many countries now have a national language that is used for both writing and speaking, and for both daily occasions and formal ones. One obvious example would be the United States, but there are many more examples around the world. However, if you look back a few centuries it is not hard to find diglossic societies; one thinks of pre-modern Europe in which people would live their daily lives in German, French, Hungarian and so forth, but when they entered the church or the university were suddenly in the domain of Latin (which only a small elite could understand). And Europe was more the rule than the exception – many, if not most, pre-modern societies were diglossic.

From a historical perspective, what happened is as pre-modern diglossic societies moved into the modern era, mass literacy became more important, and in order for print culture, education, and even a sense of national pride to develop most nations decided to de-throne ancient classical languages like Latin, Sanskrit, and Classical Chinese, and replace them with a modern national language. Now, this process was actually a bit trickier than it sounds because in

most countries there were quite a few different candidates for the throne – either different dialects of the most widely used vernacular language in the country or perhaps entirely different languages – so one variety had to be picked, standardized and promoted. Often there was one candidate that was quite obviously ahead of the others, often because it already had a widely known written form and perhaps even some kind of literary tradition. For example, in China, the country I study most, even while Classical Chinese was still being used in the education system and in the imperial examinations (which went on right up until the early 1900s), there was also a variety of northern Chinese called Mandarin (*guan hua*) that had become the spoken lingua franca of government and was also widely used in popular literature, so in the early 1900s it was chosen as the new national language (*Guo Yu*). As you might imagine this process was not without controversy – there were many other spoken forms of Chinese such as Suzhounese, Cantonese, and so forth – and there was debate about whether or not the new national language should try to include these in some way. But essentially the others lost out and Mandarin became the new national language, promoted through the schools, print culture and so forth.

I suppose you could say that what I do is study the losers – the varieties of Chinese that didn't get chosen as the national language. Several of these languages, including Suzhounese and Cantonese, were used quite widely not only as spoken languages but also in writing, and what I study is how the written forms of these languages continued to grow – or not – even after Mandarin became the national language.

This was probably not the smartest choice of research topic; it isn't considered especially hot or sexy, you have to spend a lot of time learning different varieties of Chinese, and then you need to spend even more time deciphering old texts in which the way they write Cantonese, Suzhounese or whatever isn't the same as how they speak it today. To top it off, you need to figure out how to write this up in English in a way that is intelligible and preferably even somewhat interesting to an audience that isn't already familiar with the written forms of Cantonese, Suzhounese, Shanghainese, and so forth.

Does all of this have any tie to Christian faith or calling? Oddly, there are a few ways in which it does. As we all know, Christians (especially Protestants) are pretty obsessed with translating the Bible into “heart languages” – local vernaculars – and in China many missionaries spent a great deal of time translating the Bible into any different varieties of Chinese; in fact, for some varieties of Chinese about the only written text you can find is the Bible. But, to be honest,

in most of the history I study the missionaries don't play much of a role; in fact, once Mandarin was chosen as China's national language the missionaries quickly produced a Union Version of the Bible in Mandarin and from that time one generally lost interest in translating texts into local Chinese dialects.

I have taken you on this rather lengthy detour for three reasons. First, as is true with any academic, I spend a lot of time studying and writing about this stuff, but don't get many opportunities to talk about it – imagine trying to strike up a conversation about diglossia at a potluck dinner – and since I had a captive audience today I decided to take advantage of you. Second, I hope this has effectively made the point that there aren't a lot of obvious overlaps between this field of study and Christian mission. Finally, I hope it drives home the point that research involves a very substantial time commitment – generally extending far beyond work hours and deeply into one's private life and personal time. Hence the question: From a Christian perspective, is it all worth it?

In my remaining time I will disappoint you by not answering this question – at least not in a universally applicable way. I really can't say whether doing research is a good use of time either generally or more specifically for you. But what I will do is talk about choices I have made in my own life – what pressures I faced, what I decided to do, and why. Originally I planned to organize my talk around a long list of reasons why a Christian language teacher might want to consider doing research, kind of like my *English Teaching as Christian Mission* book (Snow, 2001), but I decided this talk will actually work better – and perhaps be a little more interesting – if I do it in a more biographical way. So I'm going to talk about three chapters in my life when I have devoted a substantial amount of my time to research, and for each of these examine why I chose to do that. So, without further ado....

Well, I guess we do need to start with a little bit of further ado. I should probably say a few words about the years I spent working with the Amity Foundation because most of what I have written that you may be familiar with dates from that period. From 1991 to 2011 I was a Mission Co-Worker with the Presbyterian Church USA, and from 1993 to 2003 I was seconded to a Chinese NGO called the Amity Foundation, founded by Protestant Chinese church leaders, where I worked with a project through which language teachers (English, Japanese, German) came from church bodies in many countries to work in regional teacher training colleges, mostly in second-tier cities, in China. It was during those years that I wrote the first edition of *More*

Than a Native Speaker (Snow, 1996), *English Teaching as Christian Mission* (Snow, 2001), a textbook published in China called *Encounters with Westerners* (Snow, 2000) and also an introductory Chinese textbook called *Survival Chinese* (Snow, 2002). Obviously this meant I spent a lot of my time writing, but I didn't feel any tension between the time I spent writing and my Christian mission calling because almost everything I wrote was intended to support and enhance the work of Christian English teachers, and often English teachers in general. That's probably all I need to say about that.

Research and Me – Chapter One

The research issue really began to emerge for me more around 2011 as I was transitioning to a teaching position at Nanjing University. After ten years in an administrative position with Amity I wanted to get back into the classroom, so I negotiated with the Presbyterian Church about a new assignment, and the decision was made for me to go teach at Nanjing University (also serving as PC USA's Regional Liaison for China). One might think that moving into a faculty position at a top Chinese university would put pressure on me to become "academically productive" – i.e., to do research and publish. However, it actually didn't, at least not directly. Predictably, the Presbyterian Church didn't really care if I did any academic research; in fact, they preferred that I use as much of my spare time as possible for my regional liaison role. More surprisingly, while Nanjing University was delighted to have a foreign professor with a doctorate who had written some books, they didn't have any direct interest in whether or not I did academic research, because as a "foreign expert" anything I published wasn't counted toward the department's publication total, presumably because they assumed foreign teachers were only short term guests anyway.

So the choice of whether or not to do academic research was pretty much up to me, and life probably would have been easier if I had chosen not to do it – after all, I had a pretty heavy teaching load, I was putting in a fair amount of time with local churches and Amity projects, and then there were those pesky PC USA administrative duties. But instead I chose to do a book on the history of written Cantonese (Snow, 2004), which had been my doctoral dissertation, and then a series of articles on diglossia (e.g., Snow, 2013a, 2013b). Why? Or, perhaps, what was I thinking? Honestly one reason was personal interest. I have long been fascinated by Chinese dialects and the history of their written forms, and I simply wanted to keep researching this topic.

I've always had a feeling that this topic deserves more scholarly attention than it has gotten. I kept reading tantalizing brief comments in scholarly books to the effect that some Chinese dialects did in fact have written forms and traditions, but nobody seemed to have studied these much, and I wanted to help fill in these gaps.

A second reason had to do with staying in shape professionally. At Nanjing University I was mainly teaching graduate students who were preparing for academic careers, and one of my tasks was to teach them how to do and write up research projects. I simply felt I could do a better job of this if I was active in research myself, actually doing what I was trying to teach them to do. However, there was a third reason – I simply didn't feel right about taking an easy pass. As a foreigner I was exempt from pressure to publish, but my Chinese colleagues were not. In fact, one major change during the seven years I was at Nanjing University was a significant increase in the amount of pressure on Chinese university faculty to publish papers, and increasingly their promotion prospects and even salaries were tied to academic output. To some extent I did research because it helped me know how to help younger Chinese colleagues, many of whom faced real difficulties because they had never really been trained in academic research and had little idea what to do in response to pressure to publish. I also felt it supported my witness in the community, minimizing the chances that any positive witness my life presented would be dismissed because my colleagues could say, "It's easy for him to find time to spend at St. Paul's because he doesn't have to devote time to research." But honestly for me the main issue was what we might call solidarity – I felt I that as much as possible, as a member of that academic and professional community, I should subject myself the demands my colleagues faced; that this was part of earning my right to be a member of the community and to have a voice in it.

So, during the seven years I was at Nanjing University, I consistently devoted part of my time to more purely academic research and publishing. I also continued to put quite a lot of time into more practical or applied kinds of writing, especially the second edition of *More Than a Native Speaker* (Snow, 2006) and then a sister version entitled *From Language Learner to Language Teacher* (Snow, 2007) that was geared toward the needs of beginning teachers who had learned English as a second language; in fact, I started on that book mainly because I was teaching an EFL pedagogy class and wanted to have something accessible and useful for my students. To put it another way, I felt that I should devote at least part of my writing time to projects that seemed to have an immediate applied purpose, which often coincided with one or

more of my agendas as a Christian English teacher. However, I also spent quite a bit of my writing time on purely academic projects like those I mentioned at the beginning of the talk.

Research and Me – Chapter Two

By 2011 my wife and I had reached the 20-year point of service with PC USA, and also the point where we could officially retire from PC USA mission service (as opposed to simply leaving service). At that time the church was facing financial problems and the number of mission personnel was being cut back; also, there had been a review of mission priorities and it was clear that China was not going to be a high priority area. Also, around that time I was contacted by a university where I had taught in the 1980s, Shantou University in Guangdong Province, and they asked if I would be willing to direct the English Language Center there. One of the arguments the Shantou people made to me was that I would have more opportunity for impact as director of a fairly high profile center there than I would as a teacher at Nanjing University. So, after a fair amount of discussion and prayer we decided to retire from PC USA and move to Shantou, thus staying in China and perhaps allowing PC USA to keep one missionary couple somewhere else.

As at Nanjing University, even though I was working at a university in Shantou there really wasn't much pressure on me to publish. In fact, the vice president to whom I reported made it quite clear that he wanted me to spend as much time as possible on administration of the English Language Center (ELC), and that he didn't think it was very important for Shantou University faculty to publish. So, at best you could say that the university tolerated my scholarly activities. (He has since changed his position, and now Shantou University faculty are under quite a lot of pressure to publish.) However, while at Shantou University I did choose to spend some of my time on academic research, and the reason mainly had to do with the earlier-mentioned "impact" argument. This is a little involved, so please be patient as I explain. I accepted the position in part because I felt this would be a good platform from which to have more impact on the English teaching profession in China and elsewhere, and perhaps an opportunity to promote one of the agendas discussed in the *English Teaching as Christian Mission* book, that of peace-building. If you have read that book you know that one way I think Christian teachers – and foreign language teachers generally – can contribute toward making a more peaceful world is through teaching intercultural communication skills. My argument is that

foreign language learning and intercultural communication are tightly intertwined – in fact, one of the primary reasons one learns a foreign language is to communicate with people from other cultures. Also, the reality is that most students in China (and elsewhere) will never take a course in intercultural communication, but they will all spend years in English courses. So, why not spend some of that time in English courses learning how to communicate more effectively with people from other cultures?

As mentioned earlier, during my years at Amity I had written a textbook called *Encounters with Westerners* (Snow, 2000) that was designed to give Chinese students the chance to build English language skills while also learning something about intercultural communication. The textbook was built around “critical incident exercises” that are intended to help students build good basic intercultural communication habits and skills. While I felt a little awkward about suggesting that we should require a textbook I had written, I eventually decided I was being a little silly – nobody had much good to say about the culture textbook we were using at the time, and my textbook was designed precisely for situations like this. So, we decided to try it out. Also, about this time the publisher approached me to do a second edition of the book, and so there seemed to be good possibilities for synergy between the two efforts.

Now, where does research come into all of this? As I mentioned, the textbook is built around critical incident exercises – essentially stories in which a Chinese person meets a foreigner and a communication problem of some kind ensues – perhaps the Chinese person can’t understand why the foreigner turned down a gift or offer of help, doesn’t understand why a Western teacher doesn’t want to correct grammar errors, and so forth. After being presented with the story, the students’ task is to discuss the situation and come up with several possible explanations for what is going on. The basic theory behind this is that this kind of practice will get students into the habit of making interpretive judgements more mindfully and carefully when they are dealing with people from other cultures, and also get in the habit of stopping to think of several possible interpretations rather than automatically seizing on the first explanation that pops into their heads. Hopefully such habits will help these individual students reduce misunderstandings and possibly conflicts when they interact with foreigners – and if we are really lucky all this might even contribute to world peace....well, maybe.

There isn’t much question in the intercultural communication profession about the value of critical incident exercises – they are widely used and considered valuable (Snow, 2015).

However, if you search the intercultural communication literature you will find that it doesn't actually say much about the core part of the exercise – the process by which we go about “interpreting” – making sense of – what other people do and say, and this made me a little uneasy. Here I was, requiring that all the students at Shantou University do these exercises based on the assumption that they were helpful, and I felt I needed to be able to explain more clearly what happens in people's heads as they make interpretive judgments about what foreigners – or people in general – say and do, and also to be able to explain clearly how these exercises could make a positive impact on the intercultural competence of learners.

All of which is a rather long way of saying that during my time at Shantou I took something of a detour into the world of psychology, where I was able to find people who did research on how the mind works and how we make interpretive judgments. In particular, I had to learn a fair amount about what are called “dual process” views of human thinking that examine not only conscious thought but also subconscious, what are often called System 1 (subconscious) and System 2 (conscious) modes of thinking. While I am not remotely qualified to do actual research on how the human mind works, I did spend a fair amount of time taking findings from the field of psychology and applying them to what happens in intercultural encounters, and wrote several articles about this. (Two are now out and another that should presumably see the light of day later this year.) Perhaps more important, as I worked on the second edition of the textbook I felt I better understood what I was trying to teach, and more confident that what I was advocating was actually helpful. Candidly, while my earlier reference to “contributing to world peace” was a bit tongue in cheek, actually underneath my normal joking exterior I am deadly and passionately earnest about this. One of the most important and volatile relationships in the world today is the one between China and the United States, and the more Chinese who can and do work to make sense of the US and its citizens in thoughtful nuanced ways, the less chance there is of conflict between our people and nations. Of course, precisely the same thing is true for Americans in how they look at China. If this textbook can help a few thousand Chinese university students – and perhaps a hundred or so American teachers – learn to think in more nuanced and careful ways about the neighbor across the Pacific, I will feel I have contributed at least a bit to our mission to be builders and preservers of peace.

Research and Me – Chapter Three

After completing my three-year contract at the Shantou University ELC I decided to move to a new position at Duke Kunshan University (DKU). A full accounting of the reasons might be somewhat entertaining but it would take far too long, so let's just say that the prospect of helping set up a new university in China was simply too appealing to resist. The background story is that for several years Duke University, the city of Kunshan (right outside Shanghai) and Wuhan University had been planning to start a joint venture liberal arts university based on the Duke model, and I was invited to help set up the language training programs – the EAP courses for Chinese students and the Chinese courses for international students, faculty and staff. So, in 2014 we packed our bags and headed to Kunshan.

As you can imagine Duke University is a place where research and publication definitely are high priority, so for the first time in my life I am now working in a place where research is supported, academic output is expected, and publication is a big item in our annual evaluations. However, to be completely honest, I could probably get by without publishing very much. I do have an administrative role as well as a teaching one, and everyone understands that administrative jobs tend to have a significant negative effect on academic output. Also, candidly, I'm getting pretty close to retirement, so I could probably find a way to run out the clock. So, the question of whether or not to do academic research actually is still a real one for me – and often quite difficult because my teaching and administrative work take up all of the working day and then some, so it is not easy to find the extra time to keep research and writing projects going. So, the “why” question is still very much with me.

For this current period in my career, let me offer two very different answers to that question. The first one is a little convoluted, and also quite specific to where I am now and one set of issues I work on. I've already mentioned that I study how written forms of local Chinese vernaculars develop historically, and I'm currently working with a little team to study the history of Suzhounese and also Shanghainese as written languages. I find this quite interesting, but it is also enormously expensive in terms of time investment because I have to spend so much time learning to read and even speak two more varieties of Chinese. It would be much, much easier to keep writing about English teaching or even intercultural communication. So, what was I thinking?

Here I need us to step back and look at the big picture. The whole reason that Duke Kunshan University exists is that the Chinese government feels American higher education is superior to that offered even in top Chinese universities, and China is willing to have such an institution on its soil not only as a showcase through which Chinese universities can be exposed to new ideas about higher education but also bluntly as something of a prod that will push them to more quickly reform and work toward international standards. The danger here, as I see it, is that this fairly specific mission often gets wrapped into a larger narrative, one in which Chinese people see the United States as a somewhat unfriendly competitor that flaunts its superiority. Keep in mind that we run an American-style education program all conducted in English, and that the rationale for us being here is that our approach to education is assumed to be better, so it would be quite easy for students and the community to take the logical next step and assume that we Americans think that China is simply inferior. Of course DKU tries to counteract this impression by saying nice things about Chinese culture, food, and host of other things, but – bluntly – talk is cheap and it is not very convincing unless the Chinese community sees DKU as really investing effort in learning about China.

I thus see our little research project not only as a way to learn about history and get a paper or two published. It is also concrete evidence of genuine interest in an aspect of China and its culture, powerful in part precisely because it is expensive. It is also a vehicle for getting more students – both international and Chinese – interested in the rich cultural traditions of the Jiangnan region. Actually this project is part of a broader set of activities, such as our Kun Opera Club, that try to engage our students with local culture and give them opportunities to learn about it. Of course I invest time in this mainly because I think it is a good learning experience for students, but I am also aware that if DKU is going to have a positive impact on the US-China relationship, it is important that we be publically seen as being interested in learning from China, as well as from the US.

The second answer has a lot to do with fellow Christian, language teacher, and writer Marilyn Lewis, who some of you probably know. A few years ago I remember her telling me that, at this point in my career, it was time to devote more time and energy to mentoring younger colleagues. That probably should have been obvious to me, but it actually wasn't, and up to that point I had always done my research and writing on my own rather than collaborating with others. But what she said made me think, and I eventually realized she was right.

I guess I had always seen that, as teachers, we are also in many ways shepherds for our student flocks, but it hit me that as I got older, and especially as I took on administrative and leadership roles, my flock also included my colleagues, especially younger ones just getting started in the profession. And for my younger colleagues in the Language and Culture Center at DKU, there are two things I worry about: The first is that, as is true in many universities, many of the language teachers don't have doctorates and aren't actually required to do research. Now, for some of them this is probably fine – they are quite happy focusing on their teaching and don't really have much interest in doctorates, research, or advancement to higher academic ranks. But the danger is that some young language teachers who actually do have a long term interest in such things get lulled into a sense of security by the fact that they don't face immediate pressure to publish, so they tend to wait until they “have more time” before doing getting involved in projects. Of course, the problem is that nobody ever “has more time,” and there is real danger of waiting too long.

The other thing I worry about is that young faculty won't find a research area they truly find interesting and rewarding. I know more than a few young language teachers who get an MA, then teach for a few years, and then decide to get a doctorate because they know it will be helpful for their careers. So, they get into a program, wind up doing a dissertation in some area that was suggested by an advisor because it is a good one for getting papers published. So, they do the dissertation, graduate, and then realize they need to keep publishing because they want to keep getting promoted. The problem is that they do research and publish mainly because this is part of climbing the career ladder – not because it improves their teaching, satiates their curiosity or makes the world a better place. My hope is that I can help younger colleagues find ways to continue growing as professionals and academics - and find ways that are exciting, satisfying and seem to have real purpose.

All of which is a rather long way of saying that now one of the main reasons I start projects is to engage younger colleagues. Last year I had the pleasure of working with two of my colleagues on a project where we interviewed Chinese students about the strategies they used for building their English speaking skills – which is interesting in part because middle school and university English classes in China normally don't focus on speaking much since it isn't tested on standardized English examinations. Also, when I was asked about doing a third edition of *More Than a Native Speaker* (Snow & Campbell, 2017) I brought in another young colleague,

Maxi-Ann Campbell (who some of you will probably meet at the TESOL convention), mainly because I needed her help with the internet world of the 21st century but also because I thought that working on a book would be a good experience for her. And now, as mentioned earlier, I am working with two other colleagues on a project to map the history of how Suzhounese and Shanghainese have developed as written languages. Of course, I'm not sure my colleagues get as excited about the particular questions we study as I do, but at least they gain some valuable experience and sometimes perhaps also encounter topics and ideas that do lead them into areas they find exciting.

For several years after graduation from college I considered going to seminary and perhaps becoming a pastor. Now it has dawned on me that, in a rather different way, I really am a pastor with a wonderful flock that includes not only my students but also my colleagues. Candidly, it probably would be easier and faster to keep doing research and writing projects on my own. But bringing in colleagues has been wonderfully satisfying and I have no plans to revert to my earlier solo mode. Marilyn was right.

Conclusion

Clearly, I don't have a universal answer to the question of why Christian educators might engage in academic research, and in my own life the answers have varied enormously depending on where I taught, where I was in my career, and a host of other factors. As you have seen, sometimes the reasons I have engaged in research had to do with relatively practical concerns, such as being in solidarity with colleagues as they face pressure to publish, helping younger colleagues move forward in their careers, or simply staying in shape myself as a teacher. At other times I have been driven more by what we might call big issue concerns such as the desire to make a contribution to better intercultural understanding and even better relationships between China and the US. However, for all of these, at least part of my motivation came from what I perceive to be my calling as a Christian who teaches languages in a university setting, and I feel each is part of my Christian vocation or mission.

In conclusion, my intent today really isn't to issue some kind of clarion call for all Christian English teachers to drop everything else and dive into research. What I have shared today is my sense of what I am called to do in my particular work setting and stage in life. However, it would also be fair to say that I think at least some of us, especially those in

university environments, should be engaged in research. But, my main desire was simply to share my own experience and sense of calling, one that is probably a little unusual but also gives me a sense that I am, if only imperfectly, being a faithful steward of the opportunities God has given me. May we all go in peace today and keep listening to discern what God's call is for us wherever we live and work.

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Don Snow (don.snow@dukekunshan.edu.cn) holds an MA in English/TESOL from Michigan State University and a PhD in East Asian language and culture from Indiana University. He taught language, culture, and linguistics in China for many years as a Mission Co-Worker of the Presbyterian Church (USA), and has worked with a number of English teaching organizations. At present he is Director of the Language and Culture Center at Duke Kunshan University.

