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Studying the Russian Language in China: Historical Background, Current State, Problems and Prospects

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Abstract. The relevance of this research is underpinned by the importance of supporting and promoting the Russian language as an instrument of the Russian Federation's humanitarian policy abroad, coupled with the strategic significance of the comprehensive partnership of our country with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Against the backdrop of rapidly intensifying Russian-Chinese relations, the training of highly qualified Chinese specialists proficient in Russian has emerged as a critical factor for effective cooperation in economic, scientific, technological and cultural spheres. In this context, the purpose of this article is to evaluate the current state of Russian language education in China. In this research the authors employed a combination of general scientific and historical methods. The foundation was formed by the historical and problem-chronological methods and approaches. The history of Russian language learning in China spans over three centuries, commencing with the establishment of the Russian Language Institution in Beijing in 1708. A peak in popularity of Russian language study occurred in the 1950s, fueled by the Soviet-Chinese alliance relations, followed by a decline during the subsequent deterioration of bilateral ties. A renewed phase of growth began after China introduced its reform and opening-up policy in 1978, gaining further momentum with the development of the strategic partnership between Russia and China at the beginning of the 21st century. At present, the Russian language maintains a stable position as one of the most sought-after foreign languages in China, trailing only English and Japanese in terms of prevalence. The Chinese Association of Teachers of the Russian Language and Literature plays a leading role in consolidating the community of Russists and providing methodological support. The authors highlight several key challenges, including the persistence of outdated teaching methodologies prioritizing grammatical accuracy over communicative competence; a deficit of contemporary teaching materials; the geographical concentration of Russian language centers in Northeast China and the limited career prospects for Russian studies graduates lacking supplementary specializations. As a viable solution, the study proposes a wider adoption of the "Language + Specialty" model. This approach cultivates specialists who possess not only Russian language proficiency but also competencies in specific professional fields (e.g., economics, law, technical sciences), thereby better aligning with the demands of Russian-Chinese practical cooperation.

Key words: education, study, Russia — China relations, history, humanitarian policy, Shenzhen MSU — BIT University

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Изучение русского языка в Китае: история, текущее состояние, проблемы и перспективы

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Аннотация. Актуальность исследования обусловлена важностью поддержки и продвижения русского языка как инструмента гуманитарной политики Российской Федерации за рубежом, а также стратегического характера российско-китайских отношений. В контексте динамичного развития двусторонних связей подготовка высококвалифицированных китайских специалистов, владеющих русским языком, становится ключевым фактором эффективного взаимодействия в экономической, научно-технической и культурной сферах. Выявлены особенности текущего состояния изучения русского языка в Китайской Народной Республике (КНР). Теоретико-методологическую основу исследования составил комплекс общенациональных и исторических методов и подходов. История изучения русского языка в Китае насчитывает более трех столетий, начиная с основания в 1708 г. Русской школы в Пекине. Пик популярности русского языка пришелся на 1950-е гг. и был обусловлен союзническими отношениями Советского Союза и КНР. Затем последовал спад интереса к русистике, связанный с ухудшением двусторонних отношений, и лишь с началом проведения в Китае политики реформ и открытости в 1978 г. интерес к изучению русского языка начал постепенно восстанавливаться, выйдя на высокий уровень с развитием российско-китайского стратегического партнерства в начале XXI в. На современном этапе русский язык занимает устойчивые позиции как один из наиболее востребованных иностранных языков в КНР, уступая по распространенности лишь английскому и японскому. Ведущую роль в консолидации русистов и методической поддержке преподавателей русского языка играет Китайская ассоциация преподавателей русского языка и литературы. Среди ключевых проблем в изучении русского языка в Китае авторы выделяют использование устаревших методик обучения, делающих акцент на грамматике, а не на коммуникативных навыках, недостаток современных учебных материалов, географическую концентрацию центров изучения русского языка в северо-восточных регионах Китая, а также ограниченные карьерные перспективы выпускников-русистов, не имеющих дополнительной специализации. В качестве решения предложено активнее внедрять модель «Язык плюс специальность», которая готовит специалистов, владеющих не только русским языком, но и компетенциями в конкретных профессиональных областях (экономика, право, технические науки), что в большей степени отвечает запросам российско-китайского сотрудничества.

Ключевые слова: образование, изучение, российско-китайские отношения, история, гуманитарная политика, Университет МГУ — ППИ в Шэнъчжэне

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Introduction

The relevance of the research is due to a number of factors.

Supporting and promoting the Russian language are the key elements of the humanitarian policy of the Russian Federation abroad, which contribute to the formation of a positive attitude towards our country in the world, acceleration of its scientific, technological and socio-economic development, and attraction of highly qualified specialists.¹ This is also the most important tool of Russia's cultural diplomacy (Tsvyik, 2018a, p. 139). Therefore, analyzing the current state of Russian language studies in a specific foreign country enables the efficiency of promoting the Russian language to be assessed and, if necessary, adjustments to be made within the framework of implementing humanitarian policy as a whole.

Developing a comprehensive strategic partnership with the People's Republic of China (PRC), including in the humanitarian sphere, is one of the main foreign policy priorities of our country. Due to the rapid strengthening of bilateral ties between Russia and China in economic and humanitarian areas, it's necessary to cultivate highly qualified Chinese specialists with knowledge of Russian language and vice versa.

The proficiency in the Russian language among Chinese specialists, officials, and entrepreneurs significantly simplifies interaction between the parties, increases the efficiency of negotiations, and accelerates the implementation of joint plans.

Russian and Chinese scientists collaborate on significant research projects in fields such as medicine, biotechnology, space exploration, ecology, and numerous other disciplines. While English remains the primary lingua franca for conference participation and publication in academic journals, a proficient command of Russian frequently serves as a vital factor for

successful and nuanced communication among project participants.

Within the Chinese educational sector, there is a growing interest in Russian language acquisition, propelled by an active bilateral exchange of students and postgraduate researchers. Pursuing higher education at Russian universities has become an increasingly prevalent choice among Chinese students, particularly for those intending to build careers in international projects or within sectors that maintain close ties with Russia. By analyzing trends in Russian language study across the People's Republic of China, Russian academic institutions can tailor their curricula and course offerings, while also expanding internship programs and initiatives for academic mobility.

The Russian language is intrinsically linked to a rich cultural heritage, encompassing the literary works of esteemed authors, as well as seminal achievements in science and the arts. There is a considerable interest among the Chinese populace in this cultural legacy, driving a desire to gain a deeper understanding of the traditions and customs of Russia's peoples. Faculty and students from universities in both nations actively participate in cultural and educational events, festivals, and exhibitions, thereby demonstrating a mutual scholarly and cultural engagement. Assessing the proficiency levels in Russian attained by Chinese learners provides valuable insights into the reception of Russian culture and illuminates potential avenues for its further promotion.

In this context, analyzing the status of the Russian language in China is of particular importance. It allows us to understand *how in-demand is Russian language learning is in contemporary China*, which educational institutions are most prominent in teaching Russian and which Russian language programs generate the greatest interest among Chinese students.

¹ Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of September 5, 2022 No. 611 "On Approval of the Concept of the Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad" // President of Russia. September 5, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/48280> (accessed: 21.02.2025).

The purpose of this article is to assess the current state of Russian language studying in China.

To this end, the following tasks must be completed:

- to consider the main periods of the establishment and further development of Russian language studies in China,
- to review statistical data on the number of Russian language learners in China and to compare these indicators across different historical periods,
- to consider the role of the Chinese Association of Teachers of the Russian Language and Literature and Russian language centers in this process,
- to identify key problems in studying Russian language in China and their possible solutions.

This research employed a combination of scientific methods. The foundation was formed by the historical and problem-chronological approaches. Problem-chronological approach allows for the development of a periodization of the process and its analysis in chronological sequence, highlighting the key problems of each stage. The authors actively use quantitative data to assess the current state and dynamics of Russian language studies. The authors also compare the position of the Russian language across different historical periods.

The authors also consider the study of the Russian language in China as a complex system consisting of interconnected elements, such as educational institutions, the regulatory framework, professional associations, and Russian language centers.

The practical significance of the article lies in the fact that the research materials can be taken into account in the implementation of Russia's humanitarian policy in the Chinese direction, primarily in the field of promoting the Russian language in China.

The topic of the situation of the Russian language in China has been the subject of numerous articles by Russian researchers (Andreeva, 2022; Ganshina, 2015a; 2015b;

Ganshina & Tsvyk, 2016; Goryachev & Zakharov, 2024; Tsvyk, 2018a; 2018b). A large number of scientific works by Chinese and Russian scientists are devoted to the study of the historical aspect of the situation with studying the Russian language in China (Datsyshen, 2013; Khohlov, 2009; Lapin, 2009; Chao & Zhang, 2020; Tenchurina & Liu, 2023; Verchenko, 2009; Wang, 2018).

Among Chinese researchers, it is particularly worth noting the scientific works of Ning Qi, vice-rector of Peking University. In her work titled "The interaction of foreign languages and society: A review of Russian language education in China" she examines in detail the history of the issue of learning Russian in China and the main problems in this area at the present stage (Ning, 2021). Several Chinese researchers consider the current situation of studying Russian in China (Liu, 2022; Liu L., 2017; Liu H., 2012; Xiaoxia, 2020), including emerging problems in this sphere (Li, Lei & Feng, 2022) and new ways for improving the teaching Russian system (Gao & Yan, 2023; Li & Wang, 2023; Lu, 2024; Yang, 2023; Yuan & Olesova, 2023).

Studying the Russian Language in China: Historical Background

The history of studying the Russian language in China dates back to the beginning of the 18th century. In 1708 in Beijing the Qing government established the School of Russian Language, which was the first school in Chinese history to train Russian professionals (Ning, 2021, p. 22). For a long time, the Institution also maintained close contacts with the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Beijing.

This Institution existed for 154 years (Wang, 2018, p. 577). In 1862 the School of Russian Language was incorporated into the Beijing Tongwenguan School of Foreign Languages, which was established in those years (Lapin, 2009, p. 103). This School laid the foundations for the systematic study of the Russian language in China, allowing the Beijing authorities to gain significant experience in organizing language schools.

Since the Xinhai Revolution in China, with the spread and the increasing influence of Marxism in the world after the founding of the Soviet Union, both the Kuomintang Party and the Communist Party realized the importance of connecting with the Soviet Union and both devoted themselves to cultivating professionals with fluency in Russian and an adequate knowledge of the Soviet Union (Ning, 2021, p. 23). According to statistics, before the founding of the People's Republic of China, there were 13 schools in China that had Russian language departments (Fu, 1988, p. 48).

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a new period in the study of the Russian language in China began. The allied relations between the PRC and the Soviet Union, as well as the large-scale assistance of Soviet specialists in the development of China's economy and industry, contributed to a rapid rise in the interest of the Chinese population in learning Russian. The educational system of the PRC was modelled on the Soviet system (Verchenko, 2009, p. 77). At that time, Russian language classes were held in primary and secondary schools and universities throughout the country, and a large number of students were sent to the USSR.

By 1952, a total of 36 colleges and universities across the country had established Russian departments (Liu, 2017, p. 1). According to statistics, by 1956, 1,960 teachers of Russian were employed at Chinese universities, and over 13,000 students were enrolled on Russian language courses (Ning, 2021, p. 25). In this period the Shanghai Foreign Studies University has established the first dissertation council in China with the authority to award academic degrees in the field of Russian Language and Literature (Liu Y., 2012, p. 256).

With the beginning of the “cultural revolution” and the worsening in relations between the USSR and the PRC, the situation with studying the Russian language in China went through a difficult period.

Since 1978, when the PRC's government announced a policy of reform and openness, the

cultural and educational exchanges with the USSR have begun to recover.

The establishment of the China — Russia Language Teaching and Research Association was a major milestone in the development of Russian language education in China. In January 1980, nine institutions, including Beijing Foreign Studies University, Peking University, Heilongjiang University and others formed the preparatory group for the Chinese Russian Teaching Research Association. On May 3, 1981, the association was formally established in Shanghai, with a total of 1,300 members (Ning, 2021, p. 27).

The next period of growing interest in studying the Russian language occurred in the late 1980s. Along with the gradual normalization of Soviet-Chinese relations, contacts were restored in all areas, primarily in cultural and educational areas, the exchange of interns and specialists at the state level resumed. By the mid-1980s, 29 colleges and universities across China had introduced the Russian Language major (Fu, 1988, p. 120). In the early 1990s, comprehensive cooperation between China and Russia and the continuous development of trade with other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries led to a rapid increase in the demand for Russian language teachers in China.

The beginning of the 21st century marked a new stage in the study of the Russian language in China.

From 2003 to 2005, the reforms were carried out in Chinese universities to improve the teaching system of Russian language, aiming to coordinate academic plans and train specialists in line with the requirements of the market economy, as well as considering the trends in trade and economic cooperation between Russia and China.

According to Chinese experts, by 2005, about 6,500 students were enrolled in Russian majors at 68 universities across China, 700 teachers were engaged in teaching Russian (Ning, 2021).

In 2005, the Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Russian Federation on learning Chinese in the Russian Federation

and learning Russian in the People's Republic of China was signed. It was an important step in strengthening the position of the Russian language in China. The Agreement covered the main areas of cooperation in the field of learning Russian in China and Chinese in Russia. These include the annual exchange of qualified specialists; exchange of textbooks, library and information resources and other teaching materials; the exchange of schoolchildren studying Russian and Chinese, students of philology and teachers of the Russian and Chinese languages, organization of Olympiads and competitions for knowledge of the Russian language, literature and culture of Russia, etc.²

Another important bilateral document concerning the promotion of the Russian language in China was the Cooperation agreement between the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China on cooperation in the field of education, signed in 2006 in Beijing. According to the Agreement, the parties agreed to deepen cooperation in the organization of the study and teaching of Russian and Chinese in both countries.³ Consequently, the study of the Russian language in China has received a regulatory framework as an important area of Russian-Chinese humanitarian cooperation.

Another important factor contributing to the increased interest in learning Russian in China was the 2009 The “Year of the Russian Language”

within the framework of the “Years of National Languages” projects in Russia and China.

The initiatives undertaken to promote the Russian language have produced favorable results. According to statistics, Russian Language majors have already been opened in 103 Chinese universities in 2010.⁴ About 12,000 students studied Russian as a main specialty. In 2015, about 25,000 people studied Russian in 145 universities.⁵ By 2020, Russian was being taught as a specialty in 168 universities, with an average of 26,000 students per year, while a further 20,000 people were studying Russian as a second foreign language.⁶

Studying the Russian Language in China at the Present Stage

The Russian language is currently one of the most widespread foreign languages in the country, which is studied by Chinese students and schoolchildren. Compared to the other BRICS countries, China confidently ranks first in terms of the number of Russian language learners (Goryachev & Zakharov, 2024).

The study of the Russian language among the local population shows positive dynamics, primarily due to the possibility of choosing it within the framework of the unified state exam (Gaokao) and easier tasks compared to English. Another important factor is that, against the background of the development of Russian-Chinese cooperation, employment prospects for university graduates proficient in Russian are increasing.

² Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Russian Federation on Learning Chinese in the Russian Federation and Learning Russian in the People's Republic of China // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. November 3, 2005. (In Russian). URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru-foreign_policy/international_contracts/international_contracts/2_contract/45958/ (accessed: 01.05.2025).

³ Cooperation Agreement between the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China on Education (Beijing, November 9, 2006) // ChinaRusLaw. July 6, 2008. (In Russian). URL: http://www.chinaruslaw.com/RU/CnRuTreaty/001/200876173344_116405.htm (accessed: 01.05.2025).

⁴ Year of the Russian Language in China and Year of the Chinese Language in Russia // China Internet Information Centre. September 25, 2009. (In Russian). URL: http://russian.china.org.cn/news/txt/2010-09/25/content_21003040.htm (accessed: 22.08.2025).

⁵ On the Status of the Russian Language in the PRC (Reference Materials). Russian Embassy in China. 2015. (In Russian). (Unpublished).

⁶ On the Status of the Russian Language in the PRC (Reference Materials). Russian Embassy in China. 2020. (In Russian). (Unpublished).

According to statistical indicators, the position of the Russian language in China is quite good, given that there is generally no need to study foreign languages for practical employment purposes (Belousova, 2024, p. 13).

In terms of the number of university students and general education students studying foreign languages, Russian ranks third in China after English and Japanese (Liu, 2022, p. 126). The total average annual number of Chinese students and schoolchildren studying Russian exceeds 80,000 people.⁷ There are about 1,600 Russian language teachers, representing a twofold increase since 2005 and a threefold increase since 2010 (Goryachev & Zakharov, 2024, p. 87). The Russian language and philology are taught as specialties in 181 higher educational establishments in China (compared to 2005 this figure has almost tripled).⁸ The number of students studying Russian is about 36,000 people about (6 times more than in 2005 year) (Goryachev & Zakharov, 2024, p. 90). Approximately 20,000 students study Russian as a second foreign language. The Russian language is taught in more than 280 schools in China, and over 40,000 schoolchildren study Russian (Yuan & Olesova, 2023). It is a compulsory subject in about 123 schools in 19 provinces (Chen, 2017, p. 292).

Among the Chinese higher educational establishments teaching the Russian language or philology, the leading positions in Chinese rankings are occupied by the universities in Beijing, Shanghai, as well as in Northeast China, whose border provinces have deep historical and cultural ties with our country. Among them, at the top of the ranking are Beijing Foreign Studies University, Peking University, Capital Normal University, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Shanghai International Studies University, Dalian University of Foreign

Languages, Jilin University, Heilongjiang University, etc.⁹

The Role of the Chinese Association of Teachers of the Russian Language and Literature and Russian Language Centers

The key organization operating in the field of dissemination of the Russian language in the PRC is the Chinese Association of Teachers of the Russian Language and Literature (hereinafter referred to as the Association). This Association which consolidates the community of specialists in the Russian language in China systematically provides methodological support to Russian language teachers, organizes advanced training courses, conferences, round tables, publishes the journals Russian language in China, Russian Language in Secondary School and others (Goryachev & Zakharov, 2024, p. 91). The Association is a part of the All-China Society for the Study of Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, but it enjoys considerable autonomy. The Association unites 100 Russian language institutes operating within the leading universities of China. Its headquarters is located at Peking University, and its president is Ning Qi, the vice-rector of Peking University.

Russian language competitions are regularly held at higher educational establishments in the Association. In April-May 2024, such events took place at Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing Normal University, etc.

The Russian language training is also provided on the basis of Russian language centers which operate under the auspices of the *Russkiy Mir Foundation* and the Pushkin Institute partner network or are opened with the participation of Russian higher educational establishments on the basis of Chinese ones. Most of them are themed rooms for classes of students of the

⁷ Meeting with Students and Professors at Harbin Institute of Technology // President of Russia. May 17, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74064> (accessed: 22.02.2025).

⁸ 181 Chinese Universities Have a Russian Language Specialty // Xinhua News Agency. December 3, 2024. (In Russian). URL: <https://russian.news.cn/20241203/b49518b5e0eb4116bceacb3124c6b69e/c.html> (accessed: 21.02.2025).

⁹ Eyu zhanlue daxue paiming [List of Universities with a Russian Language Specialty] // Daxuesheng bi bei wang [Education in China]. May 3, 2025. (In Chinese). URL: <https://www.dxsbb.com/news/2090.html> (accessed: 22.05.2025).

faculties or departments of the Russian language, at which they were created (Tsvyk, 2018b, p. 37).

However, experience shows that the activities of such establishments have no significant impact on increasing the number of people studying Russian in China. These Russian language centers are financed and controlled by Chinese higher educational establishments both in terms of personnel policy and curriculum content. The effective functioning of these centers is also hampered by the lack of educational literature from Russia.

The situation is different at the Russian Language Center, which operates in the structure of the Shenzhen MSU — BIT University, the flagship project in Russia — China educational cooperation. Studying Russian is mandatory for all Chinese students at the university, of which there are more than 1,500 people (Goryachev & Zakharov, 2024, p. 90). Russian teachers work at this center, and Russian language teaching is carried out using Russian educational literature, among other resources. The university has a Russian language testing center where students can take proficiency tests and receive certificates based on their results.

In addition to the Russian language center at the MSU — BIT University, the Russian language courses are organized on a fee-paying basis at the Russian Cultural Center in Beijing. At the same time, there are no branches in other regions of China, so it is only open to residents of Beijing and the surrounding area.

Instead of a Conclusion: Problems and Prospects of Studying the Russian Language in China

Thus, the authors have examined the situation regarding the study of the Russian language in China from the 18th century to the present day, based on statistical data. After reaching its peak in the 1950s, the popularity of Russian language learning in China dropped sharply during the Sino-Soviet relations crisis of the 1960s and 1970s. Following the normalization of relations between the USSR and the PRC in the late 1980s, and the subsequent

development of Russo-Chinese ties in the 1990s, the number of Russian language learners had increased by the beginning of the 21st century, a trend which has continued ever since.

The authors concluded that, alongside the primary centers of Russian language instruction based in higher educational institutions and educational organizations, the activities of the Chinese Association of Teachers of the Russian Language and Literature play a particularly important role. This Association consolidates the community of Russists in China and provides teachers of Russian with systematic methodological support.

However, a number of issues affecting the training of Russian language specialists should be highlighted.

As Russian scientist E.Yu. Andreeva notes that the main problem with teaching the Russian language in China is the use of outdated teaching methods (Andreeva, 2022, p. 172). Many Chinese teachers primarily focus on vocabulary acquisition and grammar mastery rather than on communication skills. Consequently, most graduates lack the ability to utilize their language training for either communicative interaction or professional application. They possess substantial theoretical knowledge, but lack adequate practical experience.

Another negative factor is the shortage of high-quality teaching materials for Russian. Many textbooks were originally written over half a century ago and have been repeatedly reprinted since the 2000s. They contain obsolete vocabulary, which is completely irrelevant in modern communication contexts (Li & Wang, 2023, p. 87).

In this regard, it is necessary to intensify efforts on improving the qualifications of Chinese teachers both through the Association (for example, by increasing the number of professional development programs, regularly sending Chinese teachers on internships in Russia on preferential terms, providing them with methodological support and including them in Russia's national scholarship programs for foreign specialists) and directly with Chinese universities within

the framework of existing bilateral partnership educational programs. All these measures fully comply with the main directions of Russia's national language policy aimed at creating conditions to promote and strengthen the position of the Russian language abroad.¹⁰

Geographical factors are also significant. It should be noted, that most Russian language centers are territorially located in China's northeastern regions bordering Russia. These regions demonstrate significant demand for professionals with Russian language proficiency. At the same time, densely populated and more economically developed southern and central regions of China lag behind in both the pace and scale of Russian language dissemination. The number of Russian language learners in these regions is significantly lower than in Northeast China. In this context, it would be advisable to expand Russian language centers in these regions, taking into account their socio-economic development prospects.

Another point worth noting is that students, which specialization is Russian language, often face employment challenges after graduating from university. As they do not have qualifications in other fields, their professional opportunities are limited (they typically work as Russian language teachers or translators).

In this context, there has been an observed increase in the popularity of studying the

Russian language among students for whom it is not their main subject. Russian as a foreign language is increasingly in demand for those studying economic, technical and legal specialties.¹¹ After graduation, this enables them to use the Russian language in practical work with Russian partners. President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin noted the relevance of this trend at the meeting with students and teachers of the Harbin Institute of Technology during his state visit to China in May 2024. In his opinion, the rapid development of Russian-Chinese relations “creates a need for specialists who could not only speak two languages, but also work together in the relevant fields.”¹² On this background, some researchers note that a transition is occurring within Chinese universities specializing in foreign languages. The shift in focus is from the previous training model, which involved studying a foreign language exclusively, to a new paradigm, i.e. the “language + specialty” model, which incorporates both language learning and specialty. This new model is becoming an important task (Wang, Kosmacheva & Zolotykh, 2022, p. 103; Xiaoxia, 2020, p. 89). In this context, Implementing such training programs will facilitate the preparation of a greater number of highly qualified specialists with a command of the Russian language, thus aligning with the demands of Russian-Chinese cooperation.

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