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Discussion: The Local Practice of 'Global Chinese'

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Figure 1: Chinese advertisement in Canary Wharf Station, London, 2017

In the largely monolingual landscape of the London Underground, the advertisement in the photo above stands out with its prominent display of Simplified Chinese and a young Chinese woman doing a very “Chinese” thing – taking a picture of the food on the table with her phone. The use of Chinese idiomatic expressions in the speech bubbles and the creative code-mixing in the slogan make it clear that the advertisement is intended for bilingual Chinese speakers. While the subtle language play might be opaque to non-Chinese speakers, the simple presence of the advertisement illustrates the premise of this special issue: Chinese, or more precisely Mandarin Chinese, is gaining popularity and prominence in the world.

Recent statistics seems to agree. In the surveys conducted by the Modern Language Associations in 2009 and 2013 (Goldberg et al. 2015), the enrolment in Chinese language classes in U.S. universities increased by 51% from 2002 to 2006, second only to Arabic (126%), and continued to rise by 2% from 2009 to 2013, despite the decrease in the total enrolment in all languages classes during the same period. Similar trends were also observed in the UK (Zhu Hua and Li Wei 2014). But the higher education sectors of the UK and US represents only a fraction of the global expansion of Chinese language education. According to *Hanban* (formerly known as National Office of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign language, or NOTCFL in short), in 2013, five million people took the HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) worldwide, a dramatic increase from 750,000 test-takers in 2010. The increase of interest in learning the Chinese language is further boosted by the ambitious project of *Hanban* to establish Confucius Institutes around the world, emulating the British Council, Alliance Francaise, and Goethe Institute in their shared objective to strengthen national soft power through language and culture. As of 2016, there are 512 Confucius Institutes and 1073 Confucius Classrooms in 140 countries on 5 continents, and its expansion is most noticeable in East and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the number of international students studying at Chinese universities also reached a historical high of 442,773 in 2016, with 60% coming from Asia, followed by 18% from Europe, and 11% from Africa (Marsh 2017).

While these numbers paint a rather optimistic outlook, the official promotion of Chinese language learning and teaching has not gone without challenges and resistance. Despite its economic progress, China is still widely perceived as an authoritarian state. As Ding and Saunders (2006) argue, factors such as unsatisfactory human rights records, tightened political censorship, and general lack of freedom of speech, consequently undermine China's soft power and diminish public interest in Chinese language and culture. In fact, several Confucius Institutes in the West have been criticised and even closed over growing concerns about human rights and academic freedom (Guttenplan 2012; Marcus 2013; Sahlins 2013).

Secondly, Taiwan provides an alternative destination for learning Mandarin Chinese, and its Ministry of Education has established overseas language teaching centres similar to the Confucius Institutes. Finally, among the Chinese diaspora, the global rise of Standard Mandarin Chinese is also sometimes perceived as a threat to the diverse linguistic and cultural identities that have characterized overseas Chinese communities over centuries (Semple 2009; Zhu Hua and Li Wei 2014).

These undercurrents as discussed above point to a more complex reality behind the rise of Chinese globally, where language ideology and practices are entangled with economic incentives, political ideologies, and cultural identities. This special issue provides a timely and valuable contribution to our understanding of this entanglement. Taking us from Kathmandu, Nepal, to Taiwan, to Vancouver, Canada, each of the papers situates the discussion in diverse geopolitical contexts and offers concrete analysis of how the shift in the political and economic landscape of nation-states on the macro level impacts individual decisions and practices on the micro level. Drawing upon a range of key concepts and themes in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, this special issue also prompts us to reflect upon the parallels and divergences between Chinese as an emerging global language and the status quo of English. In this discussion, I attempt to bring together these diverse perspectives and approaches through the lens of Bourdieu's social theory of practice, focussing particularly on the concepts of *cultural capital*, *field*, and *habitus*.

1. Material versus Symbolic Power

One direct consequence of the rapid growth of the Chinese economy is that more and more people are learning the language for both short- and long-term material benefits. This view of language as commodity, characteristic of neoliberal ideology (Holborow 2015), enhances the material power of Chinese. Meanwhile, as the three papers in the special issue have shown, a variety of historical, cultural, and social factors of local contexts have also constrained the expansion of the symbolic power of the Chinese language. This economic motivation is most evident in Sharma's study of the Nepalese tourism industry, where the

ability to speak Chinese, in however 'truncated' form, could immediately generate more income in the forms of generous tips by Chinese tourists or, in the long run, a more competitive salary, and where the linguistic landscape of an entire neighbourhood changed to tailor to the tastes of mainland Chinese tourists. Less transparent links between language and monetary profits are given in Fang and Duff's paper, when their participants chose to study Chinese for a better career prospect, and in Chen's paper, when increased encounter with mainland tourists led to accommodation to Mandarin Chinese. The appeal of the Chinese language, however, seems restricted to its potential economic benefits.

Language, according to Bourdieu (1986), is an example of cultural capital which manifests itself in three states: embodied (e.g. pronunciations), objectified (e.g. textbooks, dictionaries), and institutionalised (e.g. tests and exams). Materially, cultural capital could be converted into economic capital; symbolically, it could also promote upward mobility in the social hierarchy. Most importantly, this conversion process, as Bourdieu points out, is contingent upon the appropriation of the language by individual agents. In other words, the material and symbolic powers of language depend on how well they are mastered by learners.

While it seems that even partial competence in the Chinese language could generate economic benefits in the Nepalese tourism context, it is unclear whether knowledge of the language leads to any change in the social prestige of its learners, i.e. social capital. In contrast, English, as many researchers (e.g. Pennycook 1994) have found around the world, not only boosts employability in the globalized service economy, it also still enjoys higher social prestige, and maintaining global symbolic dominance. In other post-colonial contexts such as Hong Kong, researchers (e.g. Lai 2001) have also found that English retains its high social prestige despite the number of people learning Chinese for pragmatic reasons has increased. Although Nepal has never been colonised, British influence has reached this landlocked country through the East Indian Company and the legacy of Gurkha (Nepali nationals recruited by the British Army and the armies of other British colonies). The first schools established by the elite ruling class in Nepal at the end of 19th century borrowed the

British curriculum and used English as the medium of instruction (Poudel 2016), and English has remained a compulsory subject in both private and public schools from the first grade (Sharma). The mountainous landscapes of the country and its rich cultural heritage have also made it a popular destination for international tourists, especially backpackers and trekkers. English has been the default lingua franca in the Nepalese tourism industry, until the recent influx of mainland Chinese tourists. When the tour guide interviewed by Sharma explained "They (Chinese tourists) don't speak English much. There is no use when only we speak it and they don't.", he is simultaneously pointing out the material devaluation of the English language and maintaining its symbolic power by using it to distinguish 'us' from 'them'.

Sharma's study serves a powerful reminder that when we talk about the emergence of Chinese as a global language, it is often added to an already vibrant "multilingual and multicultural space" (Sharma; see also Sharma and Phyak 2017) that were shaped by former colonial powers and current globalisation processes. In addition to English, Hindi has also exerted a heavy influence on Nepali society and culture thanks to shared border, religious practices, and the popularity of Indian TV and Bollywood films. Although as Sharma observes, recent political and economic tension between these two countries have seemed to motivate some Nepalis to learn the Chinese language in order to distance themselves from Indian influences, such a cultural shift would presumably take more than one generation to complete.

The separation between material and symbolic values is even more evident when Mandarin Chinese is perceived to threaten the linguistic and cultural autonomy of other varieties of Chinese. In Fang and Duff's study, the student from Hong Kong is learning Mandarin Chinese for purely instrumental reasons and reluctant to embrace popular cultural products from mainland China because her whole life "was engulfed with Cantonese popular culture." And the difficulty in embodiment was visceral when the Taiwanese clerk shared with Chen that she would get literally "tongue-tied" by over-curling her tongue when

speaking to mainland Chinese tourists. These experiences further suggest that when Chinese language is acquired as a form of cultural capital, it is mainly converted into economic capital and rarely into social capital (Bourdieu 1986). In other words, its symbolic power has not grown along with its material power, as some might have assumed. This leads me to the second theme which emerges out of the three papers -- the politics and economics of difference.

2. The Politics & Economics of Difference

Similar to the Nepali situation described by Sharma, the growing Chinese economy has also brought an influx of mainland Chinese tourists to Taiwan since 2008, but here the increased exposure to Putonghua has paradoxically strengthened the symbolic power of Taiwan Mandarin. Spencer Chen explains this diachronic shift using the concept of indexicality. Positioned as a less prestigious, 'sub-standard' variety in the past, Taiwan Mandarin has come to index nationalist pride and reinforce linguistic and cultural boundaries when the political and economic borders between Taiwan and mainland China are becoming more permeable. It provides a contemporary example of how political and cultural ideologies influence perceptions of linguistic differences (Irvine and Gal 2000).

After 1949, both the Chinese Communist Party in mainland China and the Nationalist Kuomintang party in Taiwan embarked upon a project of establishing standard national languages *Putonghua* and Taiwan *Guoyu* in their respective territories. As they were both based on the dialect of Beijing, these two standard varieties are mutually intelligible. As part of the standardisation process, other varieties of Chinese, such as Cantonese, were relegated as regional dialects in mainland China, even when they are mutually unintelligible with *Putonghua*; in Taiwan, Taiwan Mandarin was considered as a non-standard form. Chen observes that such standard language ideology is still upheld by some speakers of Taiwan Mandarin (Excerpt 1), who perceive the non-retroflex as a linguistic deficiency rather than difference. This hierarchical relationship was unsettled by mass tourism from mainland China, when *Putonghua* was introduced into the everyday sociolinguistic scene of Taiwan

and changes the indexical field of Taiwan Guoyu. Their close proximity means another variety that is linguistically more distant from *Putonghua* was needed in order to maintain an independent political and cultural identity.

Although the differences between Taiwan Mandarin and *Putonghua* are many (as Zhu Hua and Li Wei 2014 note, there is even a cross-strait dictionary), the linguistic features commented on by Chen's participants, e.g. retroflexion and intonation patterns, are largely gradient in nature. (There was one example of syntactic difference in Excerpt 3, which in my opinion, are two different expressions. It is also quite common in *Putonghua* to say *ni zhende hen meiyou wenhua*, the second expression *mei wenhua zhen kepai* would add emphasis.). These linguistic features, to Chen's participants, do not simply index a variety of Chinese spoken in mainland China but a whole range of other characteristics in their N+ indexicality. As we see on Amy's map (Figure 4), the evaluation of linguistic differences extends to other social stereotypes beyond language – Beijingers sound overbearing and unpleasant while people in Hong Kong and Macau are perceived 'cool.' Thus, the process of revalorizing Taiwan Mandarin is also simultaneously a semiotic process of reconfiguring the indexicality of *Putonghua*, creating a separate social and cultural group indexed by linguistic differences.

In addition to foregrounding nationalist identity, highlighting the linguistic differences between Taiwan Mandarin and *Putonghua* also helps to re-organize the social division of labour (Irvine 1989), in which the former is associated with the role of tourists and consumers and the latter with the role of hosts and service providers. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, the way in which cultural capital is transmitted and acquired (e.g. language, literature, art, and education) often disguises it as a legitimate competence instead of a capital, but in fact, it also follows the logic of exchange and yields profits proportionate to the distinction of its owner. In other words, the scarcer a cultural capital is, the higher material and symbolic values does it carry. The value of cultural distinction is particularly visible in tourist economy, which thrives on differences, but only to the extent such differences are still

comprehensible and communicable. In situations where the host and guest languages are mutually unintelligible, tour guides often double as linguistic and cultural translators (Jaworski & Thurlow 2010). In this special issue for example, one student interviewed by Sharma in the Chinese language programme is motivated to learn Chinese in order to introduce her native Newari culture to Chinese tourists. On the other hand, the proximity between host and guest languages and cultures facilitates mutual comprehension but fails to provide the essential tourist experience (Hall-Lew and Lew 2014), and gradient linguistic variations are thus accentuated and even performed to authenticate a sense of foreignness (Schilling-Estes 1998). Tourism encounters described in Chen's paper is akin to the second kind of situation. Even though we do not yet know empirically whether the linguistic differences between Putonghua and Taiwan Mandarin are consciously performed, it would be interesting to note how, in addition to geopolitical differences, the tourism context is also conducive for linguistic variation.

The pressure on Taiwan Mandarin in the face of the global spread of Mandarin Chinese is also palpably felt in the Chinese diaspora. As Zhu and Li (2014) note, the term 'Global Chinese' has expanded over the years to include a wide variety of languages spoken by the Chinese communities living overseas. These different languages could provide "a strong source of identity and self-esteem" for their speakers especially since they tend to be perceived as a homogenous ethnic group by non-Chinese (McKay and Wong 1996: 589). However, as Zhu and Li (2014) also observed, the teachers and managers of the official Confucius Institutes or Confucius Classrooms often lacked the awareness of the linguistic and cultural diversity of overseas Chinese community and embodied standard language ideologies in their teaching by legitimising Putonghua and relegating other varieties as merely dialects. While some ethnic Chinese learners questioned the institutional representation of language and culture, they hesitated to correct the teachers' mistakes (see also Li Wei 2003). On the other hand, the teachers were also observed to avoid politically sensitive topics such as the One Child policy (31). If the heritage language classroom is a

space where linguistic and ideological differences are quietly negotiated and contested, popular culture, as Fang and Duff's study demonstrates, provides an opportunity for students to explore and engage with the underlying ideologies more openly and critically.

3. The Reflexive Language Learner: Structure vs. Agency

Although the three papers in this special issue set out from the same premise – the rise of Global Chinese, they have also interestingly illustrated a wide spectrum of individual responses to this phenomenon, from eager acceptance to active resistance. A striking example comes from Bal Sharma's interview with Namrata (Excerpt 1), in which she used the phrase 'I heard' or 'I have heard' three times to explain why she was learning Mandarin Chinese. The frequent mention of the economic lexicon further shows how much the public discourse about China's investments in Nepal has influenced her individual decision. However, the neoliberal public discourse though prevalent, does not provide motivation for all language learners. As Zhu Hua and Li Wei (2014) found in their study, surprisingly, students took up Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language for a plethora of personal reasons, some as mundane as love for Chinese food. These divergent observations point to the necessity of considering the individual language learner as 'a complex social being' (McKay and Wong 1996), who is constantly negotiating multiple discourses and ideologies.

Fang and Duff's study examines the agency of individual learners through case studies of their engagement with Mandarin Chinese popular culture. Based on in-depth interviews, they aim to discern 'what identities they (the participants) prioritize, and how they decode (and also construct) various linguistic and other ideologies in the cultural artefacts.' (Fang and Duff). Two of the participants reported in the paper are heritage learners from Hong Kong Chinese families, but their reactions to the exercise could not have been more divergent. While the male student, John, enthusiastically embraced Taiwanese TV shows, the female student, Phillis, chose a Mainland-Hong Kong co-production and rather unwillingly watched it in Mandarin Chinese. John's enthusiasm certainly has to do with his experience of being an Asian male in North America, as he explained to the researcher, but at the same

time, we also learned that Cantonese had already been largely absent from his linguistic repertoire as his parents only spoke English at home. And the fact that, for John, male idols in Taiwanese TV dramas can index Asian masculinity in general seems to suggest that he has perhaps also been socialised into the kind of colonial discourse which tends to erase the subtle distinctions between minority languages and cultures. One wonders, for example, if John had learned Cantonese from a young age, would he have identified more closely with male characters in Cantonese TV or films rather than Taiwanese ones like Phillis? Or if John's research interest had been about Sino-Japan relations, would he have found a similar sense of identification in Japanese pop culture? These hypothetical questions are not intended to suggest a different analytical outcome but rather to point out that even though John displayed a high level of critical awareness of gender discourse in North American popular culture, his choice of Taiwanese TV was shaped by other social and historical conditions as well, such as language shift and loss among the Hong Kong Chinese diaspora (cf. Li Wei 1994) and the increased participation of younger generations of Chinese immigrants in the public discourses of ethnic, gender, and racial equality (cf. McKay and Wong 1996). Similarly, we might speculate to what extent Phillis's rejection of Mandarin Chinese popular culture was also shaped by the increased tension between Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese in recent years.

The complexity of each individual case study reported in Fang and Duff demonstrates that the identity of the individual language learner or speaker is better characterised as a *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) or historical body (Scollon and Scollon 2004) of accumulated experiences and dispositions rather than membership in static social categories. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is useful here as it presents a dialectic approach to the interplay between structure and agency in identity research. On one hand, our *habitus* is the collection of experiences as we move through *fields* (e.g. class, profession) and respond to their rules and regulations, and thus shaped by social structure. On the other hand, *habitus* is also generative in that it engenders new practices that constitute the *field* in return, thus shaping

social structure. As Adams (2006) notes, “Agency and autonomy are embodied in the concept of habitus, but they are qualified by the caveat of accumulated history, both personal and collective” (515). The critical engagement with popular culture as exemplified in these case studies is an example of such reflexive agency, which is itself a form of habitus required by certain fields, such as academic studies and research. All three participants in Fang and Duff’s paper are university students, and John is planning for a Ph.D. in international relations. Gordon’s critique of the propaganda film “*The Founding of a Republic*” was interpreted as coming from ‘a critical audience member from a liberal-democratic political system,’ but it could also have been shaped by his prior experience with Chinese films of high artistic calibre which inspired him to study the Chinese language in the first place. His comments then demonstrate the reflexivity of a film critic as much as that of a citizen from a democratic society.

The high level of critical media literacy demonstrated by Fang and Duff’s participants contrasts sharply with the unquestioned internalisation of news discourse observed by Sharma. This is, however, not to suggest that the university students are more agentive than the tour guides. As Adkin (2003, cited in Adams 2006) reminds us, reflexivity itself comes from a privileged position in late modernity. It is a form of cultural resource which is not equally distributed across society. Reflexivity or the lack thereof is shaped by one’s participation in various fields, and as we have seen in this special issue, tourism and education are two cultural fields which have been impacted considerably by the global rise of Mandarin Chinese. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate how individuals respond to this social change.

4. Conclusion: ‘The wordliness of Chinese’

According to the 2017 edition of Ethnologue (SIL International 2017), there are 1.09 billion speakers of Mandarin Chinese in the world, of which 193 million (17.7%) are L2 speakers. On the other hand, 983 million people speak English in the world, of which 611 million (62.2%) are L2 speakers. The 898 million L1 Speakers of Chinese live in 14 countries,

and the 372 million L1 speakers of English live in 106 countries. It took English more than a millennium to become a global language it is today, and it has only been four decades since the People's Republic of China opened its doors and joined the free market of exchange. Putting these numbers side by side is not to determine which language is more global today but to remind us that Chinese is gaining prominence indeed, albeit in a world which has already been transformed by the English language. This is the historical context which we cannot ignore in any discussion regarding the current status of Mandarin Chinese around the world.

As Pennycook (1994) has argued, the global spread of English is by no means 'natural, neutral and beneficial'. English is not only the language of imperialism (Phillipson 1992), it is also the language of global capitalist market (Naysmith 1987 cited in Pennycook 1994), of which China has become one of the key players. The increasing economic prowess of China is arguably supported by the growing number of Chinese people who can communicate fluently in English. After all, English has been a compulsory subject in the national curriculum since the early 1980s (Bolton 2006). A recent national language survey put the number of people who had learnt English at 390.16 million (Wei and Su 2012). Outside the classroom, millions have invested countless hours participating in English corners (S. Gao 2012) and watching American TV online (Y. Gao 2015). At the same time, more and more Chinese parents can afford to send their children to study abroad at both postgraduate and undergraduate level (Bodycott 2009). Therefore, when a group of Chinese engineers were sent to help build a power plant in Nigeria, they were not worried about language barriers. In addition to having a professional interpreter working for the team, they all spoke some level of English themselves, which was sufficient for daily communication with the local company. Thus, it seems that the global expansion of Chinese economy does not necessarily lead to the global expansion of its language. On the contrary, it has led scholars such as Graddol (2012) to argue that China, along with India, holds the key to the future of English.

These global trends also impact social relationships on a more local level. One of the implications of the global spread of English, as Pennycook (2014) points out, is the creation and maintenance of an educated elite within postcolonial societies such as Hong Kong even after the colonisers have left. High social and economic prestige is also accorded to the English language and its speakers in China. If we take a look at the credentials of young CEOs of large Chinese companies, many were educated abroad, mostly in English-speaking countries. Outside China, increased English-language proficiency also means that the new generation of high-skilled immigrants prefer settling in more affluent suburban areas rather than relying on urban enclaves.

It is against this backdrop that I have attempted to read this special issue through the lens of Bourdieu, whose theory of practice brings together several key themes that have emerged out of these three papers. Sharma's paper shows how the economic and social values of Chinese as cultural capital were separated in post-colonial Nepal; Chen's study illustrates the convergence between the symbolic value and potential material benefits of linguistic differences in the field of tourism; Fang and Duff's paper demonstrates how learner identity and agency could be understood as habitus and reflexivity. Bourdieu, of course, is only one of the many theoretical approaches we could use to understand the complex interplay between the global and the local. And as demonstrated in these three papers, the subject of global Chinese can be linked with a wide range of theories and concepts in sociolinguistics, such as language ideology, attitude, and identity. They could also benefit from a closer connection with sociolinguistic studies of similar contexts, such as tourism, media, and neoliberalism. This would also entail an expansion of methodology beyond interviews to include other methods such as interactional analysis, critical discourse analysis, and linguistic ethnography. Together, this special issue makes an important contribution to research on global Chinese by situating the analysis and discussion firmly in the local contexts. To borrow Pennycook (2014)'s term referring to the local complexity of English, this special issue moves us a step closer towards the 'worldliness of Chinese'.

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