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Multilingualism and good citizenship: The making of language celebrities in Chinese media

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Abstract: This paper examines language ideologies underlying the media representation of Chinese citizens speaking multiple foreign languages. It argues that a figure of good citizenship is being articulated via valorization of multilingual competence that is grounded both in the newly cherished moral values of neoliberal globalization – entrepreneurship, reflexivity and flexibility – and in the traditional moral values of patriotism and contribution to society. Such configuration of citizenship departs from the nationalist monoglot language ideology, and yet demonstrates a flexible nationalism that links multilingual competence to personal welfare and social harmony. This study shows the importance of paying attention to the dynamic interplay between social class, nationalism, and neoliberal globalization in our analysis of language and citizenship.

Keywords: multilingualism, language learning, nationalism, media, globalization, China

1 Introduction

The increasing mobilities of people at the current phase of globalization have posed many new questions for sociolinguistics, and recent sociolinguistic studies have explored the multiple and dynamic relations between language and people on the move. For example, recent studies have examined the introduction of language testing as a gatekeeping mechanism for the obtainment of citizenship (e.g. Piller 2001; Milani 2008; Extra, Spotti and van Avermaet 2009). Other research has explored the new social and sociolinguistic orders emerging in transnational communities (e.g. Blommaert et al. 2005; Blommaert 2010; Blommaert 2012; Park and Lo. 2012). While the focus on people on the move, i.e. immigrants and immigrant communities, sheds light on the new social order under globalization, what has been less examined is local nationals

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for whom new ways of behaving are also emerging in relation to these transnational flows. This is not just a grassroots issue, however. As I will show below, it is embedded in new ways of governing population under globalization.

Specifically, I suggest that transnational flows have placed a new spin on the notion of citizenship, in particular with regards to language competence. While existing sociolinguistic research has examined the notion of citizenship in its legal sense (e.g. Piller 2001; Milani 2008), citizenship can also be examined as a social (and linguistic) practice, in particular with regards to how one fulfills the rights and duties as a citizen of a certain country. In most cases, as Heller (2013) notes, this is concerned with being a good citizen, and as she elaborates,

in this sense, of course, what is meant is not strictly the legalities of citizenship but, more broadly, what being a good citizen means, what counts as the performance of the good citizen, and how that is tied to access to the resources distributed by the state and its agencies. The moral order of the nation-state is tied to its economic, political, and social order (Heller 2013: 189).

Also, in recent sociological and anthropological research, it has been shown that the narrow definition of citizenship as a political and legal category based on the nation-state is being re-articulated in relation to transnational flows, which has led to the flexible management and practice of citizenship (Ong 2006; Zweig 2006). On the one hand, ‘strict discriminations between the citizens and foreigners are dropped in favor of the pursuit of human capital’ (Ong 2006: 499). On the other, ‘the embrace of self-enterprising values has made citizenship rights and benefits contingent upon individual market performance’ (Ong 2006: 500).

Drawing on these insights, this paper shows that in the current phase of globalization, the old model of citizenship based on the essentialist and nationalist ideologies of one language/one nation is being transformed, though certainly not totally replaced, due to the ever increasing transnational flows, and being a good Chinese citizen, as both a political notion and social practice, is being re-configured in this process. I interrogate this issue by looking at two otherwise unknown ordinary Chinese citizens, one being a tour guide, the other a policeman. Since the early 2000s, both have been appearing frequently in Chinese media, receiving multiple honors and rewards due to their highly acclaimed competence in speaking multiple foreign languages. I ask how and why their multilingual competence has become newsworthy and celebrated during the past decade, and why they are portrayed as figures of good citizenship in contemporary China. Answering these questions can help us understand the underlying language ideologies informing these media constructions, and thereby explore how tensions between nationalism and globalization are reconciled in these new figures of good citizenship.

To understand these media discourses on language competence and citizenship, it is important to adopt a socio-historical perspective that could help uncover the ideological and social changes that foster the emergence of such discourses and the construction of such figures. Therefore, I first trace the indexicalities, i.e. social meanings, of multilingualism, focusing on how Chinese citizens speaking foreign languages (henceforth multilingual speakers) have been represented since ancient China. As social meanings are not mapped directly onto language speakers but are mediated by the stances (Eckert 2008: 455) that people take towards certain languages/varieties that speakers (are believed to) use, these circulating media discourses become an important site for examining ideologies about foreign languages and the changing notion of citizenship in China. I pay attention in particular to the contentious ways in which multilingual speakers are represented in relation to nationalism. This socio-historical review shows that the indexicalities of foreign languages are not static but constitute what Eckert (2008) calls an ‘indexical field’:

a field of potential meanings ... or constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable. The field is fluid, and each new activation has the potential to change the field by building on ideological connections (Eckert 2008: 454).

I then show how new ways of governing the population have emerged in China since the 1990s, in particular via the re-configurations of nationalism, or what might be called *neo-nationalism*. I then look at media reports on the two multilingual speakers, and examine these reports as metadiscourses on multilingualism. In analyzing these discourses, I do not intend to verify the speakers’ language competence. Instead, I consider representations of language competence as ideological constructs (Blommaert et al. 2005; Park 2010; Lo and Kim 2012), which could allow for an understanding of what indexicalities are being constructed for multilingual competence, and, more importantly, how this is linked to certain personae (Agha 2005).

I show that the valorization of multilingual competence indicates the re-configuration of citizenship in contemporary China. Also, such multilingual competence does not necessarily mean full command of the languages, but just being able to use different languages to carry out even very basic interactions as the situation requires. Nevertheless, I also show that this re-configuration of citizenship based on multilingual competence is coupled with renewed emphasis on making contributions to society, thereby perpetuating nationalism and patriotism. I conclude by arguing that multilingual speakers, constructed as figures of good citizenship in media discourses, constitute emblems (Agha 2003) of neo-nationalism in globalizing China. This new

configuration of nationalism moves away from an essentialist understanding of language competence and citizenship and orients towards a more flexible grounding of nationalism in multiple language competence as long as it contributes to personal welfare and social harmony.

2 Language and citizenship in China: A socio-historical review

Language constitutes one important semiotic resource for the construction of nationalism, as shown in the well-acknowledged one language/one nation ideology in the formation and imagination of the nation-state. This monoglot ideology is motivated by state sovereignty wherein a homogenizing pressure on linguistic diversity is exerted for the construction of one common national identity based on one national language. However, in China, such nationalist language ideology has always existed in tension with, and therefore complicated by, the ambivalent and contentious international relations that China has with other countries. Since the Opium War in 1840, when China was forced to open itself to the outside world due to imperialist powers, China has always been caught up in an insecure nationalism: on the one hand, China still wanted to build upon its glorious past as a highly civilized nation-state; on the other hand, the harsh reality of western imperialism forced China to look up to and catch up with western technologies and civilization. Such tensions are both reflected and reproduced in China's foreign language policies. What languages should Chinese citizens learn, and how is the issue of language competence related to the governance of citizens? In this section, I draw on existing research to provide a socio-historical review of the contentious relations between foreign languages and citizenship in China, focusing on how multilingual speakers are depicted as members of society.

2.1 'Frivolous rascals and loafers' (Qing Dynasty)

Throughout most of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), China's last imperial dynasty, China was basically a country closed to the outside world until the year 1840 when through its military powers, British imperialism forced China to open up. International trade between China and other countries was minimal: the first trading post was not established until 1664 in Guangzhou by British colonists, through whom the English language also first arrived in China (Pride and Liu

1988: 41). Contact with foreigners was mainly restricted to imperial families and high officials. It was noted that during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, western missionaries were at the service of the Chinese imperial power: ‘they learnt Chinese, adopted Chinese manners and contributed Western learning at the behest of the Emperor’ (Adamson 2002: 232). Most other foreigners of lower social status had arrived in China as merchants conducting international trade, and had little contact with the general public. It is worth mentioning that during this period, China considered itself as the center of the world, and that “the western merchants who reached China in their trading ships were classified as ‘barbarians’, and were regarded by the officials of the Chinese empire as no better than the barbarous tribes of central Asia” (Bolton 2003: 146; Pride and Ru-Shan 1988: 41). This negative perception of foreigners is also reflected in the policy that the Qing government had in terms of international trade. In the seventeenth century,

the Chinese government, concerned about preserving cultural integrity, nominated Canton (Guangzhou) as the principal port for foreign trade as it was close to the South China Sea and military fortifications. Foreigners residing in Canton were restricted to a small area of Shamian Island, they could not communicate with Chinese unless supervised by *compradores* (local business agents who were registered with the authorities) and they were forbidden to learn Chinese (Hsu 1990) (Adamson 2002: 232).

The so-called *compradores* were people who made a living by serving as contact persons in China for foreign merchants and spoke mainly Pidgin English (Bolton 2003). Adamson (2002: 233) notes that “although the *compradores* were often skillful entrepreneurs with influential contacts and an affluent lifestyle, they were held in contempt by their compatriots”. It was recorded that:

these men are generally frivolous rascals and loafers in the cities and are despised in their villages and communities. They serve as interpreters only because they have no other means of making a livelihood. Their nature is boorish, their knowledge shallow, and furthermore, their moral principles are mean. They know nothing except sensual pleasures and material profit. Moreover, their ability consists of nothing more than a slight knowledge of the barbarian language and occasional recognition of barbarian characters, which is limited to names of commodities, numerical figures, some slang expressions and a little simple grammar (Teng and Fairbank 1979: 51, as cited in Adamson 2002: 233–234; see also Bolton 2003).

So in this historical period, even though they might have high income and useful social capital, multilingual speakers were associated with low social class and despicable morality. Accumulating personal wealth based on one’s foreign language competence was seen as being obsessed with material gains at the cost of serious knowledge and moral principle.

After being defeated at the Opium War, the Qing government recognized it as an urgent task to understand the West. And learning foreign languages, English in particular, was considered as a first step to achieve this goal. Tongwen Guan was thus established in the year 1861 (Adamson 2002: 234) or 1862 (Pride and Ru-Shan 1988: 42) in Beijing as the first institute for the training of students in both western languages and other knowledge. However, few people were willing to learn English, the language of the barbarian (Adamson 2002). To attract students, the institute started to offer scholarships. It turned out that most of the students were adults and had come because they lacked other ways of making a living. In fact, it was recorded that most of the students were quite ashamed of what they were doing and few would willingly tell others that they were students at Tongwen Guan (People's Education Press 2008).

However, “by the late 1870s, graduates from the Tongwen Guan began to gain appointments within the civil service or even diplomatic postings overseas (Spence 1980), and the status of the school rose accordingly. ... The work of English-speaking compradores, which had previously been associated with outcasts, became a means for budding entrepreneurs to make quick capital and useful connections” (Adamson 2002: 234). The social status of multilingual speakers gradually rose, though negative attitudes towards foreign languages did not completely disappear.

2.2 Modernization, foreign language learning, and elitism (Republican China)

The Qing dynasty came to an end with the establishment of the Republic of China (1912–1949), and the new China was ready to embrace modernization with a series of sociopolitical changes. The new Republic was established by Sun Yat-Sen, known as the founding father of China. Sun is known as “a major advocate of learning from the industrialized world”: “he sought to create a modernized China that existed on an equal footing to the industrialized nations, but which synthesized Chinese tradition with new imported ideas” (Adamson 2002: 236). His ideas were supported by a number of young intellectuals who had studied abroad (Adamson 2002: 236).

At this time, many universities and schools were run by British and American missionaries and the English language was either the medium of instruction or taught as a compulsory subject in most schools (Pride and Ru-Shan 1988: 42). It is worth noting that Sun's wife Song Ching-Ling was educated in a girls' academy run by western missionaries, and her two sisters, who were also married to high officials in the Republic of China, also received education at

western missionaries. Apart from the social elites, it was also popular among rich Chinese families to send their children to missionary schools, as they hoped to enhance their commercial dealings with industrialized nations and also to prepare their children for overseas study, in particular the USA (Adamson 2002: 236).

However, during this period of time, China was much disturbed by social instability due to internal and external wars, so that “the vast majority of the population had little time or opportunity for schooling” (Adamson 2002: 236). “During the 1920s and 1930s, ... only one third to one half of children of school age were actually receiving education. Of these, the vast majority received primary education in ‘private vernacular schools’, which received no government support. ... [A]ccess to education was severely restricted” (Bolton 2003: 194).

Due to limited access to education, and also worries about the westernization of China, there were, unsurprisingly, conflicting attitudes towards English during the Republican period. For example, traditionalists were said to have made the comment that “English is a foreign language. It has no relation to the training of citizenship and should be abolished” (Adamson 2002: 236).

So during this period, foreign languages, and English in particular, were held to be important for the country’s development and were linked up with the figure of social elites and intellectuals. But the social turmoil in China meant that only a very small number of people had access to foreign languages, and the short-lived and troublesome Republic of China failed to exert much influence on attitudes towards foreign languages among the general public.

2.3 Foreign language learning, social stratification, and brain drain (RPC)

Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, foreign language learning policy in China underwent several major changes. For a period of time, Russian was regarded as the most prestigious foreign language due to China’s Pro-Russia policy (Pride and Ru-Shan 1988: 42). However, with the split of China and the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, English replaced Russian as the preferred foreign language, as China sought to re-establish its ties with many western countries. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) then quickly introduced a dramatic twist when almost all forms of education almost came to a standstill and English was again demonized.

China finally resumed its economic development when Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978. Deng Xiaoping’s opening-up and reform policy sought to open China to the outside world while transforming the planned economy into a

market one. In this process, foreign language learning, especially English learning, was re-integrated into the national educational curriculum as an important language for China's modernization. Given the gatekeeping role of English in both educational and professional advancement, English has gradually become an important linguistic capital that people compete for (Gao, S. 2012, 2016). Over-emphasis on English, however, has always been a hot topic of debate among language teachers, applied linguists and social critics, in particular as it might arguably undermine one's Chineseness. One social critic asked “我们 *Chinese* 总不能拿英语互相问路到长城怎么走吧?” (Shall we *Chinese* use English to ask each other which is the way to the Great Wall?).

Moreover, since gaining foreign language competence is usually the first step towards going abroad to work or study, China has witnessed waves of emigration since the late 1980s. As Jin and Cortazzi (2002) note, “there is a widespread perception that speaking English confers prestige on individuals and opens doors to academic, professional and business success. However, many students also learn the language for personal reasons, such as the desire to travel or study abroad” (Jin and Cortazzi 2002: 53). This has led to a worrisome brain drain for the Chinese government (Zweig 2006: 65). It is noted that “with rising probability of going abroad, China has experienced a dramatic loss of human capital, in amount of 4–5 billion US dollars for the period 1978–1997” (Lien and Wang 2005: 154).

Faced with this serious brain drain, the Chinese government's reaction was not to tighten the controls and restrictions on travelling or studying overseas, as it did during the 1980s (Zweig 2006: 67–68), but to put forward more flexible policies to encourage overseas Chinese to make contributions to China: “in the early 1990s, the central government had to learn that, in order to improve science and technology in China, it had to let people go abroad freely, and then compete for them in the international market place by creating a domestic environment that would attract them back” (Zweig 2006: 66). This resulted in what Zweig (2006: 70) called a ‘diaspora model’ of managing overseas Chinese: “people overseas were encouraged to participate in projects in China in a variety of ways. In adopting this perspective, China joined the many developing countries which have turned to the ‘diaspora model’, encouraging their citizens who have settled abroad to help their homeland” (Zweig 2007: 70).

Obviously, a flexible policy of this kind favors the middle class and elites, and only serves to perpetuate the already stratified Chinese society. So, while people with high foreign language competence and overseas experience tend to hold socially important positions and have a high income, in reality they can also be the targets of ridicule from the general public. Chinese American returnees in China, for example, were not often welcomed by all. Chen-Ning Yang, a

Nobel Prize winner in physics, chose to return to China and was conferred permanent residency and later citizenship by the Chinese government. But he was held in contempt by many Chinese people for the selfish move of having left his motherland decades ago and now returning at an old age when his life had become less interesting in the US. Such public discourses, we could argue, are grounded in tensions between nationalism, citizenship, social inequality, and neoliberal globalization.

In this section, I have provided a socio-historical review of the changing ways foreign languages are evaluated in recent Chinese history. As we have seen, the social meanings of foreign languages are not static, but varied and dynamic, and they constitute what Eckert (2008) calls an indexical field (see Figure 1). Although in particular historical periods, certain social meanings of foreign languages may predominate, in reality there are always tensions around how foreign languages are perceived and how multilingual speakers are judged. The ‘old’ social meanings do not simply die out, but may be activated at particular times and spaces, producing ideological tensions (as in the case of Yang above). In addition, new social meanings may also emerge, which can serve to erase (Irvine and Gal 2000) disfavored old meanings and ease these tensions. In contemporary China, these tensions are intensifying because of its increasing social disparity and neoliberal globalization, and as I will elaborate below, the re-configuration of citizenship and nationalism constitutes the government’s attempt to ease tensions of this kind, with a new figure of good citizenship being constructed in Chinese media.

Figure 1: Indexical field of foreign languages.

3 Re-configuring citizenship in the era of transnational flows

Since the late 1990s, China has become more integrated with the world, in particular with its joining of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and its successful bid for the 2008 Olympic Games in the same year. These two historical events marked China's repositioning as a member of the international community. It is also within this context that major media in China have started to represent new figures of good citizenship in relation to foreign language learning.

Under the market economy, China has been favoring entrepreneurialism. This is achieved through a series of changes in policy, including the lifting of restrictions on geographical mobility; the unleashing of people's entrepreneurial spirits by ending the iron-bowl system (permanent job) and replacing it with a labor market based on contracts; acknowledging regional disparity and social inequality as an unavoidable contingent strategy for economic development; and many others. The outcome is an economically fast developing China and an increasingly unequal society. As Ong says, "as neoliberal values of flexibility, mobility, and entrepreneurialism become ideal qualities of citizenship, they also undermine the democratic achievements of ... liberalism based on ideals of equal rights" (Ong 2006: 501).

In this context, we see an increasingly stratified Chinese society, and in many cases, foreign language learning serves to perpetuate rather than change such hierarchy (Gao 2016). The figure of the foreign language speaker is therefore a complex one: on the one hand, they may enjoy high social status and economic income; on the other hand, they often learn foreign languages for very 'personal reasons' (Jin and Cortazzi 2002: 53). There is hence a void of nationalism that needs to be filled from a governmental perspective. Interestingly, such void is not to be fixed by attempts to reduce social inequality; rather, inequality is often left unacknowledged or erased, and "self-responsible citizenship" wherein people seek constant self-improvement could be moralized and somehow "linked to social obligations to build the nation" (Ong 2006: 502). Indeed, such discourses of patriotism and contribution to society are sometimes deployed by Chinese entrepreneurs (see Hoffman 2010; Gao, X. 2012) to sidestep the tensions between nationalism and neoliberal globalization. It is based on these widely circulating and contentious ideologies that we need to examine media discourses on good citizenship and foreign language learning in China today.

4 Multilingualism and figures of good citizenship

4.1 Multilingual tour guide

The first person I want to introduce is Xu Xiuzhen, also known as Mama Moon. Xu was born in the 1950s, and has been living for her whole life in the village of Moon Hill in Yangshuo County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, in southern China. Like many other people of her age in this rural village, she had received little education and used to make a living on farming. But since the 1980s, Yangshuo County started to become an increasingly popular tourism site due to its special Karst geography of beautiful mountains and rivers, and has been attracting both domestic and international travelers (Gao 2012a). With the booming tourism industry, Xu tried to earn some extra money by first selling drinks to tourists and later becoming a tour guide. There was nothing very special about what Xu did: just like many other people in her village, she tried to make a living by engaging in this new tourism industry. However, a dramatic turn occurred in the early 2000s when she became the focus of major media reports. What makes her unique and special, according to the news reports, is her ability to speak multiple foreign languages – 8 in early media reports and 11 later. Her very first media appearance was in the year 2002. She was interviewed by China Central Television (CCTV), the most authoritative and influential television media network in China. The program in which she was featured was ‘Jiang Shu’ (讲述 To Tell¹). According to the program description,

Jiangshu is a documentary-based program. It records ordinary people’s life and showcases the change of our times. It is our goal to make the most humanism-spirited social documentary. We insist on reality, try our best to be close to people, and spread social warmth through our in-depth investigation. We record the life of ordinary people in China’s development so as to consolidate the core of mainstream moral values in our country. We focus on the hottest issues in society, and help the general population form correct perspectives into social transformation; we keep in touch with the development of the country and the whole nation. Through our rational thinking and keen sensitivity, we record ordinary people’s lives so as to promote moral values, record social change, and foster nationalism (CNTV 2013).

Then what exactly it is about Xu that would help ‘promote moral values’ and ‘foster nationalism’ among Chinese people? The episode started by briefly introducing Xu as “the oldest tour guide in Yangshuo, who can speak 8 foreign

¹ All quotes and extracts from the Chinese media are my translation from Chinese, unless otherwise stated.

languages² even though she had received little education”. This brief introduction therefore underscores the incongruity of her low education level and her foreign language competence, given that the latter tends to index a good educational background in China, thereby implying that she must possess extraordinary qualities.

The documentary continued to introduce Xu as a persistent and hard-working learner. It gave a detailed account of how Xu started to learn foreign languages, English in particular. Xu’s daughter-in-law graduated from secondary high school and had learnt some English. At first, in order to sell drinks to more people, Xu started to learn English with the help of her daughter-in-law. Her daughter-in-law first taught her ‘how much’ in English so that she could understand people when they ask for the price of her drinks. Xu tried to memorize by repeating the phrase a few times, but once she was out in the mountains, she suddenly forgot everything. When she recalled what ‘how much’ means, the customers had gone. Xu then realized that ‘foreign language is an asset’ (外语就是财富), and was determined to learn English. However, learning English was not that easy, and Xu always forgot what she learnt. She became worried: the farmland was left unattended since she was now selling drinks. But because she could not speak English, she only made very little money. She was poor and had no savings at all. With the help of her daughter-in-law, she gradually became less worried and was determined to learn English well. The documentary then emphasizes and depicts in detail Xu’s extraordinary determination and diligence:

Extract 1

Mama Moon is of old age, and she’s received little education, so she’s not very confident about being able to memorize all those English words. When she learnt several [English] phrases, she would not go to sleep, because she feared that she would forget everything after sleeping. But even so, she still felt worrisome in the early hours of the morning, and would wake up her daughter-in-law to check if she had remembered everything correctly. ... Later, through her interactions with tourists, Xu also managed to pick up many other foreign languages.

Here we see that despite her poverty, Xu did not choose to rely on social welfare. Instead, Xu was persistent, hard-working, and always eager to learn (from both her daughter-in-law and tourists). It is these qualities that enabled her to make the extraordinary achievement of speaking several foreign languages. In other words, what distinguishes Xu from other people is not her social or educational

² She said in another interview, they are German, French, Hebrew, Danish, Italian, Korean, English, Swedish (CCTV 2005).

background: she relied solely on her diligence despite many obstacles (age, education, social status, etc). In this way, the issue of unequal access to foreign languages based on one's social background is erased (Irvine and Gal 2000), as it is irrelevant. What we see is that individuals instead of social structures are accountable for personal success or failure (Harvey 2005). Such neoliberal values are subtly reproduced and moralized here as core values enabling personal success. However, Xu's success is not just shown in language learning, but also in her keenness in finding business opportunities. The documentary continued to depict how Xu later decided to become a tour guide, and praised her as the 'ambassador of intercultural communication':

Extract 2

One day, Xu was on the mountain selling drinks as usual, and an Italian couple were on the mountain top with a group of tourists. The wife could speak a little Chinese, so they started talking to Xu. Xu asked them whether they wanted to go to that cave. They said, not today, we'll go two days later and you can then pick us in Yangshuo [downtown]. Xu said okay. ... Then Xu brought them to the cave ... and they gave her 40 yuan in total. After that day, Mama Moon thought, it's really good to be a tour guide, you can make a lot of money. If I only sell drinks, it's only 2 yuan a bottle. ... But if I work as a tour guide, that's a much easier way to make money.

Here we see that Xu is quick to see opportunities arising and take initiative ('The wife could speak a little Chinese' 'Xu asked them whether they wanted to go to that cave'). Even though she spoke only a little English, she was active in seeking opportunities to make money. She was good at making calculative choices and was flexible enough to make necessary changes (from selling drinks to being a tour guide). However, the documentary does not stop short of depicting Xu as someone who works hard for material gain only. It is also shown that she has a strong sense of service and contribution to community – important qualities of a responsible citizen. In the extract below, the entrepreneurial image of Xu is complemented by her high moral values. It introduces how Xu got her nickname 'Mama Moon':

Extract 3

One day, Xu Xiuzhen was selling drinks on the mountain and saw two Canadians. One of them was suffering from a stomachache and was sweating from pain. Xu Xiuzhen hadn't learnt English at that time and asked him in Chinese: 'what's wrong?' Seeing that they didn't understand her, she tried applying some medicinal balm on the younger one ... Some time later, the young guy got better. They were very grateful to Xu, and wanted to pay her. Xu said, 'I can't take your money, you're guests here at Moon Hill. I am just doing what I should do'. The two Canadians were moved by her kindness and said 'Thank you. You are just like our mom. Since you're from Moon Hill and still selling drinks at this age, we should call you Mama Moon'.

The documentary continued to show that as a tour guide Xu still kept this high sense of morality: she was always willing to provide help to tourists and she never overcharged them³. The documentary ended by concluding that her moral principles of kindness, hospitality, and simplicity help people from all over the world know about China's countryside and Chinese women.

Overall, Mama Moon is depicted as being an ordinary but great citizen in contemporary China: she has a poor social and economic background, but is hardworking, self-reliant, flexible and entrepreneurial, with a strong sense of contribution to society. These qualities disrupt the iconic link (Irvine and Gal 2000) of foreign languages with high social status, and also erase (Irvine and Gal 2000) the unequal access to foreign languages based on social class. In other words, the documentary depicts foreign language learning as grounded solely within personal initiative, entrepreneurship, and a strong sense of contribution to society. Such discourses also reconcile the tensions between foreign language learning and nationalism in Chinese society. Foreign language learning is depicted as not just for one's personal gains (material or symbolic), but for the whole community, the whole nation, and even the world.

Unsurprisingly after her first appearance in CCTV in 2002, Xu quickly gained fame and was invited by many other programs for interviews, including *People in the News*⁴ (新闻会客厅) on China Central Television (CCTV), *Contemporary Guangxi* (当代广西), *Global People* (环球人物), and others. A documentary based on her story also won one of the ten best documentaries internationally (Chen 2009). All these programs reproduce more or less the same image of Xu, and such mediatization helps spread this image of good citizenship to all Chinese nationals. Xu has become a celebrity now (Xinhuanet 2005). Reportedly, she is sought after by many Chinese people who would want to visit her and take photos with her during their trip to Yangshuo (Xinhuanet 2005; Gao 2012a; Zhang and Sheng 2017). Her popularity therefore also reflects how uncommon it actually is for people from a lower social background to be able to speak foreign languages. Thus, while media representations depict Xu's achievement in terms of self-reliance and hard-work, her very popularity among Chinese nationals reflects how unusual and uncommon such achievement is. In other words, the popularity of Xu only highlights widening social inequality in China, even as the media try to erase it.

³ Often, prices have to be negotiated with vendors in China, and foreigners tend to be overcharged.

⁴ Original English title.

4.2 Multilingual cop

Liu Wenli, well known as ‘The Bilingual Cop’ or ‘The Multilingual Cop’, was born in the 1960s in Beijing and had learnt some English when he was a student. After graduating from high school, Liu started working as a police officer in 1986. He came to fame after winning first place in an English speech contest at his police bureau in 2001, and was then nicknamed ‘The Bilingual Cop’ after appearing in a very influential investigative news program *Oriental Horizon* (东方时空) on CCTV in 2002. Since then, he has been relocated to the Beihai Park police station near the Forbidden City, which tends to have many international visitors. During his work, Liu found it insufficient only speaking English, as there are foreign visitors from many countries who do not necessarily speak or understand English. In order to help more people, Liu then started to learn other languages by himself and was said to be able to speak 13 foreign languages. Liu’s foreign language competence helped him earn the honor of the ‘Best Communist Party Member’; he also became an Olympic torchbearer in 2004 and 2008. His story has appeared in about 40 newspapers and other news media platform in China (Shen 2005).

Similar to Xu Xiuzhen, then, Liu was highly acclaimed in many media reports for his foreign language competence, his dedication to self-improvement, and his sense of commitment to the service of other people, especially international travelers in China. Liu said in an interview: ‘I am just one among the many people who can speak foreign languages. Learning foreign languages is not very difficult. We can all do it’ (Shen 2005). He also explained that his main motivation in learning foreign languages was to help others (Shen 2005).

In recent years, more policemen like Liu start to be featured in Chinese media. For example, in Yangshuo where there are large number of international tourists, being able to speak foreign languages and serve international travelers has been highly praised. In the extract below, we see another police officer who successfully deals with an urgent issue because of his knowledge of English. The article appeared on the official website of the Yangshuo Police Bureau (Wu 2011):

Extract 4

Bilingual cop helped three foreigners find their hotel at midnight

Midnight on June 4th, three foreigners found their way to West Street police station while dragging several large pieces of luggage. They came over to ask for help from the police. As it turned out, they were from France, had just arrived in Yangshuo by bus, and had been looking for their hotel for more than an hour. They had asked many people on the road for help, but because of language problems they could not communicate properly. When they walked to West Street and saw a police station, they came over for help ... After some inquiries, the police officer learnt that they only knew the English name of the hotel, and

nothing else. Since there are about 430 hotels in Yangshuo, it's difficult to find which hotel is the right one within a short time. Yang Zhenming, the officer, said we have to help them find their hotel within the shortest time, and used an English search engine to locate it. Because of his good command of English, the officer only took less than 2 minutes to find the location of the hotel. When they sent the three Frenchmen over to the hotel, one of them said, 'I've been to many countries, but only here in Yangshuo have I gotten help like a family member. You're the best!'

Here we see that the news report framed the English hotel name as a 'difficult' clue to work with, thereby underscoring the complexity of the task for police officers. Nevertheless, due to his good command of English, the exemplary police officer, Yang, was able to solve the problem in a most efficient manner. The gratitude from the foreign tourists also testified to the excellent service the bilingual police officer provided. Notably, while being able to use a search engine in the English language is unlikely to receive any attention at all among middle class working professionals in China – indeed they are expected to know English well, and if they only know how to use search engines in English, they may be looked down upon by colleagues (Gao 2016) – among police officers such foreign language competence is newsworthy and highly praised. The social class-based re-calibration of good citizenship in relation to multilingual competence shows once again that the indexical association of foreign languages with high economic or social backgrounds is erased, and in its place, one's sense of contribution to society and hard-work are highlighted.

In the cases of both Xu Xiuzhen and Liu Wenli, then, we see how multilingual competence is valorized and linked to entrepreneurship and contribution to society. Specifically, these media discourses moralize neoliberal values (flexibility, reflexivity, self-learning) by linking them to traditional values (diligence, helpfulness). Also, multilingual competence is discussed and evaluated in these discourses through the normalized medium of the national language Putonghua. The essentialist link between national language competence and national identity is hence implicitly reproduced as a baseline when a flexible nationalism that links multilingual competence to good citizenship is being articulated and constructed. The configuration of the new figure of good citizenship is thus embedded in tensions between neoliberal globalization and nationalism.

5 Conclusion

By looking at media representations of Chinese nationals speaking multiple foreign languages, I have shown that multilingual competence is valorized,

and such valorization seems to fill in a void of nationalism in relation to foreign language learning in globalizing China. By tracing the historicity of evaluative discourses on foreign language speakers in China, I have shown the indexicalities of foreign languages are not static, but keep changing, with floaters, elites, the middle class, and overseas Chinese constituting different characterological figures (Agha 2003) at different times, thereby creating an indexical field (Eckert 2008). The new figure of foreign language speakers, as shown in this study, needs to be understood against this widely circulating historical discourses. Such valorization of multilingual competence and multilingual personhood is grounded both in the newly cherished moral values of neoliberal globalization – entrepreneurship, reflexivity and flexibility – and in the traditional moral values of patriotism and contribution to society, thereby evening out the tensions between nationalism and neoliberal globalization.

The newsworthiness of the two figures examined here also indicates that as foreign language competence becomes an indicator of middle class or elite status, working class people speaking foreign languages become newsworthy. Such discourses therefore erase unequal access to language learning resources, but by doing so only foreground inequality due to the assumed extraordinariness of such stories. The construction of these new multilingual figures thus shows that such reconfiguration of good citizenship involves obscuring the issue of social inequality and social class, too. In this process, neoliberal personhood is moralized and relevant qualities are linked to traditional values of contributing to community and society. This study therefore shows that as nationalism is being re-configured from a governmental perspective in relation to increasing flows, disparity, and diversity under neoliberal globalization, our analysis of citizenship also needs to be sensitive to such change, in particular by paying close attention to the dynamic and complex interplay between social class, nationalism, and neoliberal globalization.

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