

# 6 Narrating the Future Self: Strategic Stylisation and Cosmopolitan Stancetaking in Chinese IELTS Preparation Classes

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Yingchun<sup>1</sup> told me that she had always wanted to be an architect. A student at an elite private high school in the northeastern Chinese city of Shenyang, she was also enrolled in evening and weekend classes at Washington English, one of the most expensive private English schools available. Despite pressure from her parents to study economics, she applied to a prestigious architecture program at a university in Hong Kong and was granted an English-language interview, one of the requirements of admission. I spoke with Yingchun a few days after she had returned from the interview in Beijing, and she was disheartened by her own performance. It had gone, she told me, very quickly. After introducing herself and talking about her education and background, the interviewer asked her to look around the room and discuss what architectural changes were required to improve it. ‘I’m so nervous. I say to him, I tell him, the room is very plain. Maybe put a plant in the corner.’<sup>2</sup>

Yingchun was not accepted into the program.

As we discussed the experience, I asked Yingchun if she would apply again – perhaps she could take a few more English classes to help her prepare for next time. But Yingchun was adamant that her foreign language skills were not the issue. She was an excellent student and scored highly on standardised language exams. But, she said, for all of her private English classes, she had not been raised in the right linguistic environment. The language was not ‘natural’ (*ziran*) to her, and this was what she

identified as the source of her poor performance. It was not, she felt, what she had to say but how she said it that had disqualified her.

Yingchun's invocation of an English language environment reflects a common trope of foreign language students in Shenyang and, more than lexical or grammatical knowledge, posed the greatest challenge for those who dreamed of going abroad. It is not enough to just use standard English; one must also sound like a globally situated English speaker, indexing this identity through the adoption of a range of stylistic elements such as prosody, attitude and even bodily comportment. As Vanessa Fong has extensively argued, international study is not merely an educational opportunity for today's generation of students who have come of age under a neoliberal regime of schooling in China but a means of transcending perceived boundaries, moving from locally isolated to globally competent social actors. Transnational students seek to return to China:

armed with developed world levels of wealth, developed world skills and credentials that would qualify them to receive developed world-level salaries, and perhaps legal permanent residency rights in a developed country that would enable them to travel almost anywhere in the world anytime they wanted. (Fong, 2011: 23)

These transformations are not simply legal or practical but speak to the very nature of self and the inculcation of presumably foreign systems of value, individualism, commodity consumption and so forth (Henry, 2013; Rofel, 2007; Yan, 2009). In other words, Yingchun's application to the Hong Kong architectural program was part of an aspirational pathway towards not only a future career but a future self, one defined by transnational connections and global mobility. Her failure therefore threatened to delegitimise a carefully constructed transnational persona at the core of Yingchun's self-presentation and self-identity as a global and cosmopolitan social actor.

Yingchun's framing of her failed interview as a matter of stylistic deficiency was not the only opinion on the matter, as one of her foreign English teachers made clear to me. I discussed Yingchun's story with Patricia, an Australian in her early 50s who had been teaching English in China for many years and was one of several native-speaking teachers who worked at the school. She laughed over the excuse and attributed Yingchun's failure instead to an overall lack of creativity and imagination. Chinese students, she told me, are ill-prepared for oral English exams because their foreign language education is solely geared towards written tests. And the result?

Almost zero imagination. And I think they're trapped inside this terrible education system their parents give them. They don't have any thinking for themselves. You know, you ask them, if you won a million *renminbi*<sup>3</sup> what would you do? 'I'd buy a house.' What else would you do? 'Cellphone.' Their imagination is not real good.

These competing interpretations of the interview offer several insights into both the paradoxes of contemporary Chinese transnationalism and the role of discourse in sustaining them. Note for instance how both interpretations are grounded not in the specific content of Yingchun's speech but in a higher-order metapragmatic evaluation of discourse style (Blommaert, 2010, 2015; Silverstein, 2003a). Both raise instances of discourse – Yingchun's interview or Patricia's students' responses to hypothetical wealth – to the level of ethnolinguistic social facts. External factors, such as Yingchun's nervousness and lack of architectural experience, or the limited foreign language abilities and outright boredom of students in Patricia's case, are discounted. Instead, token discursive events serve as models for, and reinforce pre-existing notions of, the speaker as a characterological type: in Yingchun's case the chronotopically and geographically isolated Chinese subject and, for Patricia, the orientalist trope of the unimaginative Asian student (see Agha, 2007: 145–89; Silverstein, 2003b).

Despite ample evidence of creativity in the students I did research with, and the fact that other Chinese students raised in a similar language environment to Yingchun's presumably passed the exam and were accepted into the program, discourse styles become ideologically regimented into enduring iconic 'truths' about groups of people (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Woolard, 2008). Short, direct answers to simple questions are considered by teachers such as Patricia to be symptoms of cultural deficiency, rather than pragmatic or reasonable conversational choices for students working in a second language. Voluble responses, in contrast, index for these teachers a clear intellectual superiority. These biases amplify the structural and economic inequalities faced by Chinese students aspiring to study abroad, who must not only deal with the financial costs of their educational choices but the symbolic costs of the discourse styles that are a natural part of their socialisation.

Recent work on sociolinguistic style and conversational stancetaking highlights the interrelationship between speech registers and sociocultural positioning. Style, taken as patterned assemblages of speech practices that, by way of their location in an indexical field make a speaker's meanings, identities, and intentions interpretable to others, is never an ideologically neutral quality of discourse (Coupland, 2007; Eckert, 2008; Eckert &

Rickford, 2001). In other words, adopting a style is always tied to a speaker taking a stance, to positioning him or herself in relation to audience and context (Englebretson, 2007; Jaffe, 2009; Kiesling, 2001; Kockelman, 2004). By way of an example, Patricia's voicing of her students' responses to her question about winning a million *renminbi* was stylised by way of a low intonation and slow pacing to convey a lack of intelligence and critical thought. And that stylisation automatically orients Patricia negatively towards her students' subject positions and differentiates herself as a properly socialised global actor – one who could find more creative ways to spend such wealth (see Park, 2013). My purpose here is to examine how such stancetaking is developed through narrative practices intended to pave the way for transnational identity formation.

English language education in China now forms a vast and growing multibillion-dollar industry, including countless private English schools ranging from simple home classrooms to multi-branch operations serving thousands of students (Hu & McKay, 2012: 347; Pan, 2015: 3). This is largely a product of the critical role English plays in China's regime of educational testing (Cheng, 2008; Zhao, 2016) and as the language of global educational opportunities. Oral language evaluations like the one Yingchun experienced are the most prominent hindrance to educational mobility, often even more important than financial cost. Consequently, students often take advanced language preparation classes that focus specifically on oral exams like TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) that are required for study abroad opportunities in the United States and British Commonwealth respectively (see Hamp-Lyons, 1998).

These classes rarely focus on simple language teaching – many feature hardly any explicit English language instruction at all – but on what Asif Agha (2007: 187) calls *strategic stylisation*, the attempt to learn and produce key stylistic elements of a register in order to animate the socially indexed personae associated with it (see also Coupland, 2007: 149–54; Rampton, 2013). In this chapter I will examine a class at one such school I call Exeter Prestige English in Shenyang. Through highly stylised and collaborative forms of narration, teachers and students at this school worked together to fashion presumably foreign conversational stances intended to appeal to test examiners while also projecting distinctly cosmopolitan – and explicitly non-Chinese – transnational identities.

The deployment of these stylistic resources was not always smooth or uncontroversial, however, which is to be expected considering the rapidly changing educational and linguistic ecologies of contemporary China. Transnational identities are fabricated through complex discourses among language examiners, teachers and students against the

backdrop of the neoliberal restructuring of Chinese education and society, while stylistic repertoires are embedded within the broader discourse context of China's ongoing social and economic development. In particular, China's recent history has undergone a process of renarrativisation in which the postsocialist reform period has been allegorised as a passage from the rural, traditional and provincialised past to a dynamic, modern and global future. This transformation is crucially dependent upon a new form of urban citizen (*shimin*) who embodies the values, ideals and consciousness of a cosmopolitan subject, in contrast to rural peasants (*nongmin*) who are limited by closed social and mental horizons (Zhang, 2006). Successful *shimin* are those who have transcended cultural and linguistic impediments to participate in global orders of sociality and belonging. The challenge for the students taking these examinations was often how to translate conversational styles and stances valued in China into a global idiom. Concepts such as 'quality' (*suzhi*) and 'self-cultivation' (*xiuyang*), for instance, are discourse tokens that index positive stances towards modernist subjectivities in contrast to conservative, traditionalist ones. But stripped of their locally determined value on international English language tests, these concepts can resist translation and form an area of contestation in the creation of global Chinese personae.

Although part of a long-term ethnographic research project, the data for this paper was largely collected during three months of fieldwork in Shenyang, China, in 2013. During this time, visits were made to six different language schools to observe classes and speak with students, teachers, IELTS examiners, administrators, parents and other interested parties. Classroom discourse was recorded where permitted and transcribed with the assistance of native Mandarin speakers. Fifteen semi-structured interviews with students and teachers were also recorded and transcribed. One representative language class is described in detail in this article to illustrate more fully the field of sociolinguistic inequalities around English currently playing out in China. Despite being the capital and largest city of northeastern China's Liaoning Province, Shenyang has experienced a long period of industrial decline leading to a sense of existential malaise described as 'backwardness' (*luohou*) that pervades the urban experience. Shenyangers experience acute anxieties about the pace of development and their place both nationally and globally in relation to other cities and locales, and these anxieties inform linguistic interactions both inside and outside the classroom. The drive for Shenyangers' transnational mobility is informed by these contextual factors: a desire to leave the city and seek one's fortune elsewhere.

### Testing, Testing, Testing: Neoliberal Education in China

The modern era of higher education in China can be said to have begun in 1978 when, after a more than a decade-long interruption due to the Cultural Revolution, national entry examinations for university education resumed (Hayhoe, 1996; Kwong, 1988). This led to a period of rapid expansion of both student enrolments and the number of schools and universities. The state still maintained control of educational resources; all universities were public institutions and graduates usually found employment through state-allocated positions (Hoffman, 2010: 53–61). By the late 1980s however, China's bureaucratic apparatus had fewer openings to fill and an ever-increasing number of graduates seeking positions. Ordinary students began looking abroad in the early 1990s for educational opportunities, either drawing upon scholarships and financial aid at foreign institutions or their own gradually expanding household incomes (Xiang & Shen, 2009).

In the 21st century, Chinese education has rapidly transformed in response to shifting state policies and the development of neoliberal reforms. As Stanley Rosen (2004) points out, educational priorities in China have moved away from the cultivation of socialist morality towards the materiality of wealth and success, particularly as measured in the global marketplace. The secure future of guaranteed employment in government or state-owned industries for university graduates has been replaced by the risk and uncertainty of private labour markets. These pressures are exacerbated by a one-child policy that has placed all of a family's hopes for future security on a single child (Fong, 2004; Kipnis, 2011; Liu, 2015).

Neoliberalism, as a broad global movement towards market models for the valuation and distribution of social goods, has had a profound impact on schooling in China. In education, neoliberalism implies the packaging of knowledge and acquired skills – including linguistic skills – as commodities that can be marketed to employers in a competitive labour environment (Block *et al.*, 2013; Holborow, 2015; Park, 2011; Shin, 2016). Although by no means a hegemonic transformation (Nonini, 2008), schooling in China can increasingly be characterised as a system in which 'education and educational credentials have become market-supplied commodities, parents discerning consumers/investors in a burgeoning transnational educational marketplace and children determining figures in the realisation of a cosmopolitan, middle-class Chinese modernity' (Crabb, 2010: 387; see also Gao, 2016; Mok, 2009; Pérez-Milans, 2013).

Nowhere is this more apparent than the crucial role testing plays in allocating human capital. Although testing has always been a prominent feature of education in China, where for two thousand years the advancement of elites through the imperial bureaucracy was tied to examinations (Elman, 2013), in today's educational landscape tests play a nearly determinative role in *every* individual's future. Success, in terms of wealth, employment, social class and prestige, are all dependent upon competitive placement in a series of examinations: the *zhongkao* for admission to senior middle school, the *gaokao* for admission to university, two iterations of the College English Test (CET) for foreign language, and a range of others (Davey *et al.*, 2007). Cheng (2008: 18) notes that these tests are not only a way of assessing students, who must possess a CET test certificate to graduate and provide to potential employers during their job search, but also a way of ranking teachers and schools, both of which are evaluated on the collective success of their students on the examination.

Tests are not simply methods of evaluation but, as Elana Shohamy (2001) asserts, disciplinary tools that shape appropriate curriculum and regulate student behaviours. Foreign language tests in the Chinese public school system are typically discrete-point multiple-choice written examinations. These are composed by Chinese educators in consultation with national curriculum and testing committees and therefore reflect the language as it is taught through domestic textbooks and pedagogies (Hu, 2002; Pérez-Milans, 2013; Zheng & Davison, 2008). The English portion of the *gaokao*, for instance, includes four sections: listening, reading, practical language knowledge (selecting the correct word to complete a sentence) and writing. There is no oral language component as the standard curriculum contains little conversational teaching or practice: most classroom instruction is focused on the close reading and analysis of English texts. The senior middle school teachers I interviewed all dedicated the final year before the *gaokao* to test preparation, endlessly drilling multiple choice questions and how to answer them. It was on these types of tests that Yingchun performed so successfully.

As I noted above, examinations necessary for transnational mobility, such as TOEFL and IELTS, do include oral language sections and, more importantly, those are administered by native English-speaking foreign examiners. The oral component of IELTS is often described as interactive: 'as close to a real-life situation as a test can get', as stated in its promotional materials, and consists of an 11 to 14-minute interview between the student and a certified examiner. An interview begins with a few minutes of short questions about the student's experiences and then, based on a randomly selected question task card, a longer 1 two 2-minute response to a general

question and a series of follow-up questions by the examiner.<sup>4</sup> The other sections of the examination are listening, reading and writing. The examiner rates the student on a nine-point scale (where nine indicates a native speaker) and the final IELTS score is an average of the scores on each section.

A sample oral interview task card drawn from the test's website lists the following potential questions, which the examiner reads out to the student:

Describe something you own which is very important to you.

You should say:

where you got it from  
how long you have had it  
what you use it for

and explain why it is important to you

You will have to talk about the topic from 1 to 2 minutes  
You have one minute to think about what you're going to say  
You can make some notes to help you if you wish

The task card then lists two further follow-up questions:

Is it valuable in terms of money?  
Would it be easy to replace?

Many of the Chinese students I interviewed were initially mystified by these types of questions; what is the 'correct' answer? Fanny, a Chinese IELTS tutor with a degree from a British university, told me how she coached one such student whose test scores continually failed to meet his expectations. After listening to his spoken responses to several sample questions, she told him that the issue was how he framed his answers: they did not follow what she characterised as a 'logical' British response pattern (cf. Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002). As she explained to me:

[Examiners] want to know why you think so. Rather than, you know, in high school, Chinese high school, you don't have to tell why you think that. You just tell the conclusions. So, I said, 'Okay, try to break your answers down into different parts. You don't have to come up with all the beautiful ideas. You have to tell me why you think so.'

On the basis of her tutoring, the student raised his score and was accepted at a British university. Fanny's coaching therefore emphasised response structures that follow the pragmatic conventions of British English. Only by emulating not only the stylistic conventions of British

discourse but appropriate interactional stances towards the question and questioner could students raise their scores and pass for properly socialised transnational subjects. I now turn to an extended series of classroom interactions to explore how such instruction proceeded in practice and how teachers conveyed these proper styles and stances to students.

### Exeter Prestige English

Exeter Prestige English is a private English training school in Shenyang specialising in IELTS test preparation. Opened in 2011 in a large downtown office tower, its classes rank at the higher end of the private educational marketplace at about 12,000 *renminbi* for an intensive five-week course (about a third of the annual salary for an average worker at the time of data collection, although there are significant wealth disparities among households). The school is owned by Winston, a native of Shenyang in his early 30s and a young, dynamic and energetic English teacher. Winston studied English translation and interpretation at a city-level university and, after graduating, delivered English training programs to Chinese employees of several multinational corporations. He worked for many different English schools throughout the city before starting his own business. Winston now runs both the school and a consulting business that provides training for Chinese IELTS teachers at other schools. Although he employs three other teachers, Winston still teaches many classes himself.

Much of Exeter's teaching focuses on preparation for the speaking component of IELTS, although there are some sessions throughout the week tailored to other sections of the exam. Each day features two 90-minute classes, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, with between five and ten students. The classes feature both lecture-type instruction – with the teacher giving advice about particular questions or answer strategies – and intensive conversational interactions where students recite prepared responses and the teacher critiques them and develops strategies for improvement. At the end of each class, the teacher provides a sample question – such as 'talk about your favourite teacher' or 'describe your family' – and students use their time between classes to compose their responses.

On a Thursday morning in the summer of 2013, Winston led me into his class, joking that the students would be more talkative today because he had brought the 'white monkey' (*bai houzi*) with him.<sup>5</sup> Like him, all of the students used English rather than Chinese names in the classroom (see Henry, 2012). After introducing me to his students, Winston began discussing some general strategic tips on rate of speech, pronunciation and lexical choice for the IELTS speaking test before getting into the meat of

the day's lesson, the sample question 'What will your life be like in ten years?' Winston modelled his own thought processes in constructing an answer for the students:

**Winston:** The clothes I'll wear, they'll be really beautiful, not like right now, right? The food I'll eat I'll pay a lot of attention (*jiangjiu*) to, right? Maybe I'll put more emphasis on the experience of dining, not like now where you just cram your belly full by madly swallowing Chinese dates (*hulun tunzao*), am I right? And then, where I live – I can live inside a villa. Not just a house, like a villa, like a beach house overlooking Hunhe River. [student laughter] That's really good. Transportation? By then I definitely won't be taking the subway. I'm driving my own car. Clothes, food, home, transportation, these are our lives. It's what the people (*laobaixing*) take notice of, right?

[bold = English, roman text = Mandarin]

In this extract, Winston introduces students to the dominant framework to which their answers should conform, contrasting a future expansive self, embodying modern character attributes, with a backwards, locally-identified and stigmatised social actor. Several lexical contrasts between these two stances stand out. The first is between the verbs 'pay attention' (*jiangjiu*) and 'cram' (*tianbao*) to characterise the styles of food consumption embodied by these two selves. The first connotes a careful and measured approach to eating, one that appreciates the slow savouring of exquisite tastes. The latter indexes the indiscriminate desires of those who stuff their guts with dates, a traditional Chinese snack. The phrase 'madly swallow dates' (*hulun tunzao*) itself is also idiomatic in the sense of not understanding or not thinking critically about the information one is given.

The second lexical contrast is between the indexical reference of the first-person pronoun Winston uses to describe himself and the audience for his self-presentation: 'the people'. Literally 'old hundred names', *lao-baixing* refers to the most common one hundred surnames of the Chinese populace and a sense of the common people or, under socialism, the proletariat. Winston therefore sets up an implicit distinction between himself as one particular kind of person and a group of common, nominally socialist-era, others who 'notice' his consumption choices. One of the key code switches occurs at the critical juncture between the descriptions of the two identities, juxtaposing the poorly-dressed, date-eating and subway-riding commoner of today with a fashionable, fine-dining, car-driving and villa beach house-living individual exemplified by Winston's

future. The likelihood of that future is initially hedged ('maybe' and 'can') but becomes progressively more certain as conveyed through his subsequent use of 'definite' and further emphasised by the declarative '**I'm driving my own car**'. Winston is therefore couching this self-transformation in the familiar stylistic tropes and stancetaking contained within discourses of modernisation and the transformation of rural Chinese peasants into modern urban citizens, which are recognisable to the students through their circulation within the broader speech community.

After modelling his own answer, Winston began eliciting similar narratives from students and collaborating with them to expand their responses. In the next extract, a female student using the English name Ann tells him she will become a physicist.

Winston: What's your opinion? Tell me.

Ann: I can be successful, I can become a physicist

Winston: That's for sure, wait until I graduate, when I graduate I will become a physicist, I will shock the world with new discovery, new law of motion. Defy Newton. Will defy the time-space continuum. Time travelling is possible, you know? I will make a time machine, I will make a perpetual machine.

Ann: It's not this [unintelligible]

Winston: What else? Or will you be sitting the chair? Looking at the monitor, Stephen Hawking. Bazinga! [Student laughter] Sheldon ... I will be the physicist.

After this initial exchange, Ann then suggested that she would be able to use more 'advanced equipment' (*xianjin de shebei*) in the future, including larger telescopes than those used in China today. This replicates the temporal structure and the attendant metadiscursive evaluations Winston laid out in his initial example. Winston then provided another extended response:

Winston: Look at ten years from now and the most exciting thing will be that I can have a bigger telescope. I will have a state-of-the-art telescope, and I will try to look for signs of a potentially new star, and guess what I'm gonna- gonna name that new star: Ann! I will name the star with my own name, and then, um, that will be- that will be the dream-come-true moment, because Ann will be always remembered by astrophysicists. Okay, that's the one crazy girl, who have a dream that one day I will have a telescope, and, uh, my forechildren will not be judged by the color of their telescope, but the content of their character. [Student laughter]

Taking these two extracts together, we can see that Ann maintains Winston's initial code preference for Mandarin. She offers some responses phrased in a stylistically conventional Chinese manner using the modal 'can' (*hui*) to mark her potential 'success' in the future. Winston prompts her to modify this sense of probability with 'for sure' (*yiding*), once again pointing to a more certain future. As Winston guides Ann in constructing her answer, he makes several intertextual references that index cosmopolitan forms of knowledge. 'Sitting the chair' and the subsequent mention of Stephen Hawking reference both the physicist's fame and his well-known physical disability due to Lou Gehrig's disease that confined him to a wheelchair.<sup>6</sup> Following this, Winston makes a further Western pop-culture reference in the form of 'Bazinga!', the catchphrase of the character Sheldon Cooper, also a physicist, on the American television show *The Big Bang Theory* (which is extremely popular on Chinese video streaming websites). Later, Winston initiates a description of Ann as '**the one crazy girl, who have a dream**' but quickly pivots into a parody of Martin Luther King's iconic 'I Have a Dream' speech, only in this case '**my forechildren will not be judged by the color of their telescope, but by the content of their character**'. All of these references act as allusions to specifically non-Chinese forms of cultural belonging that would be plausibly familiar to a Euro-American audience and to the IELTS examiner. Whether or not the students understood the intertextual references, they played along and responded with laughter. Note also the numerous tag questions ('*shi ma* [isn't it]?' and '*zhidao ma* [you know]?') that function interactionally to bring the audience into alignment with Winston's stance (Chen & He, 2001; Wang *et al.*, 2010). These processes invite the Chinese students to assimilate themselves with a broader global audience of knowing social actors who also 'get' the references and can respond appropriately; they become insiders to a participant structure centred on transnational forms of knowledge.

Throughout these exchanges, Winston adopts a confident, almost boastful, attitude in guiding Ann. Not just a physicist, he tells her, but one who will '**shock the world**' with time-travel and a perpetual motion machine. Later, he again guides Ann towards an explicitly arrogant footing by naming a star after herself. This is accompanied by Winston's adoption of the first-person deictic 'I' (*wo*) as he essentially animates Ann's response for her. Notably, in other interviews between us, Winston often contrasted the individuality of English with a kind of deferential passivity in Chinese. '**In speaking, well me, I'm Westernised, I will look you in the eye. But most Chinese, will tend to look at their fingers, at the ceiling, outside of the window.**' Here that stancetaking is evident as Winston instructs Ann not

only in words but in attitude, a cocky persona that discovers stars and names them after herself. Winston thus associates this type of confident persona and its stylistic devices with Western individualism, which he encourages students to emulate in their spoken IELTS tests.

After some further back-and-forth between them, focused specifically on academic publications and conferences, Ann narrated the final English version of her answer for the class:

**Ann:** Perhaps, after my graduation from college, I would become as- uh, astrophysicist, hopefully. And instead of staying at my house every day doing assignments, I will go outside in my car to observe the stars with the state-of-the-art telescopes. And make my new de- discoveries, perhaps name some stars after my name and, um ... perhaps I will travelling around world to attend some, uh, conventions, seminars and publish my own paper which can make me feel excited... a:nd, um::: interacting and make conversations with other international elites, I will share my expertise a:nd push forward understanding of ourselves and the universe.

The exchanges between Winston and Ann thus gradually shift from predominantly using Mandarin, to code-mixed Mandarin-English speech, and, in the end, unmixed English as the parameters of the answer take form. Aside from a few disfluencies, Ann successfully emulates both the narrative content of Winston's instruction and also the stylisation he models for her. Like Winston, she establishes a contrast in her answer centred on the transition from her conventional Chinese educational experience – staying at home doing assignments – to a more open and creative Western one, adopting a cosmopolitan stance and positive orientation to these transformations. This future self goes outside, uses advanced technology, travels to conferences and publishes academic papers. The rural, backwards, unimaginative or impoverished Chinese peasant is nowhere to be found.

### Translating Chinese Discourse Stances into Global English

Not all of these collaborative narrations were as polished and smooth as the one Winston achieved with Ann. At some points, for instance, Winston ran up against ideas or concepts drawn from the students' Chinese responses that resisted easy translation, as when a student named Kevin described how his financial responsibilities would change in the future. While the money he spends currently comes from his father, in the future, 'Maybe I'll have to take responsibility for my parents or my

**family'.** Kevin's answer is thus framed by the Chinese value of filiality (*xiao*), the debt that children owe their parents. Traditionally filiality meant physical care, including the expectation that children will remain close to parents and care for them in old age, although it is increasingly taken to refer to material comfort (Ikels, 2004). In Winston's hands, however, the debt to the older generation is reframed as a responsibility to one's nuclear household:

- Winston: You are a **family man!** Excellent. Uh, so when you're at home now you don't have that feeling, right?
- Kevin: Not... a lot of, ah, responsibility and pressure.
- Winston: Yes... right? Then, this thing is very **convenient**, very **easy**, very **comfortable**, no pressure, no responsibility, like that? Because I'm a kid! But this excuse can't be used for much longer. But this excuse will not last long, right? Maybe when I'm 18, I'm a grown-up. Wait until I'm 28, I should be the breadwinner for the family. I should be the person shouldering the responsibility for our family.

The figure of the 'filial son' is replaced by the 'family man', a type more familiar to a Western audience. In this Westernised formulation, the family is the nuclear family, with the father taking on the role of breadwinner. The relative freedom of childhood is gradually replaced by increasing burdens as people transition to adulthood. But this is a significant departure from common Chinese narrative tropes of childhood, where children are anything but free (or 'easy' and 'comfortable' in Winston's words) as they face tremendous educational pressures. Parents, in turn, have a responsibility to push their child to achieve that success (Fong, 2004). It is this responsibility, rather than merely a financial one, that Kevin alludes to in his answer and which Winston obscures in his own.

At other times the strategic stylisation of contemporary Chinese discourses into a global idiom failed altogether. David, for instance, recruited the explicit terminology of modernising discourse in China:

- Winston: **Ten years from now, later.** Something that is different from now, what is it?
- David: I can say, um, knowledge (*zhishi*) and my self-cultivation (*xiuyang*)
- Winston: Knowledge and self-cultivation? **Ten years in the future, your knowledge and your personal quality will be different.** So what is the relationship between these two things?
- David: You get them through studying.

**Winston:** Right, because I will have received fine education overseas, so the quality of my, of my, um, of my knowledge base and, um, the essence of- of- of my being, all will be different. That sentence is your main idea right there. But you should use a whole sentence to say it, got that? [David writing notes] Are you going to hesitate for half a day here?... Okay, then, your first sentence is, let's see how would you say it ... actually you can say it like this, I think ten years looking forward, ten years in the future, I think my life would be quite different than now, in terms of my knowledge and my personal quality.

In this exchange, David answers Winston's question on how his life will be different in ten years with two areas of development: his knowledge and self-cultivation. The latter is a rough translation of the Chinese term *xiuyang*, which has distinct moral overtones in addition to its literal meaning of accomplishment and self-training, analogous to Western ideals of culture, taste and breeding. The *xiuyang* individual, a key social type in modernising discourse, is successful, authoritative, refined and morally upstanding. Winston translates the student's answer with the term 'personal quality', a common gloss for the related term *suzhi*. Like *xiuyang*, the presence of *suzhi* marks urban citizens as distinguished, refined, well-mannered and therefore of higher value than the left-behind labouring masses of the socialist era. This sense of personal distinction would, however, make little sense to IELTS examiners, stylistically rooted as it is within a distinctly Chinese modernising discourse and not a transnational English one. In China, however, these are perfectly clear stance positions, orienting the speaker towards modernist sensibilities and against backwards social types. We can see Winston fumble and hesitate several times as he attempts to render the student's aspirations into a form that would be comprehensible for a transnational audience.

### Conclusion

In his analysis of speech in a college fraternity, Scott Kiesling has argued that gender identity can be viewed as a '*repertoire* of stances', meaning that interactants select from among the full range of possible stances those that position themselves as particularly gendered individuals (2001: 252). In this chapter, I have examined the case of aspiring Chinese transnational migrants who attempt to similarly locate themselves within a shifting landscape of identities and affiliations, but without a sure knowledge of the stylistic properties that generate these stances and guarantee their authenticity. Guided by teachers such as Winston, students

learn to present themselves as globally competent cosmopolitans, doling out pop-cultural references and acting in the mode of confident speakers. These stylisations demonstrate an intense desire to emulate Westernised discourse stances in their performance of standard English, but they are not effortless since they entail the translation of locally dominant discourse stances into a presumably global linguistic medium. The resultant co-constructed teacher-student narratives that I have reproduced here, intended as idealised answers to hypothetical IELTS questions, draw upon both the expected discursive norms of the test-taking conversational frame itself as well as widely circulating discourse frameworks of modernisation and development.

Those narratives also call our attention to the very nature of transnationalism itself. Traditionally tied to movement across borders (e.g. Hannerz, 1996; Ong, 1999), here we can see transnational identities being inculcated in acts of narration, stylisation and stancetaking. The student responses to the question of what their lives would be like in ten years all presumed the outcome they sought: to go abroad. And the potential future selves they outlined in class have already achieved the sociocultural dimensions of identity and the conversational footings associated with transnational personae. In other words, the students had to *act* transnational before they could have the chance to literally *be* transnational. Transnationalism is therefore less a product of movement than it is the development of a linguistic and cultural habitus and orientation towards non-local forms of social belonging.

Crucially, that linguistic and cultural habitus is an explicitly Western one. We should note here how transnationalism is not a stance equally available to all speakers. American or British students find it much easier to inhabit these kinds of characterological personae since they are naturalised products of their own socialisation. Non-Western students must, on the other hand, study these types of personae from afar in order to be awarded the opportunity to acquire them in person. Western biases and assumptions underlie the entire enterprise of educational transnationalism. We have seen in these examples just how delegitimised Chinese or other Asians forms of transnational discourse are in the global sphere, treated as inauthentic representations of transnational positioning. What room is there for a transnationalism of self-cultivation, for example, or for a filial transnationalism in the spaces otherwise occupied by the confident stances of the native English speaker (see Tu, 2016)? The possibilities of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism are therefore premised upon an inherent structural inequality between various types of global citizens.

High-stakes language exams like IELTS have long played a gate-keeping role in managing opportunity for educational mobility. But their design also, premised as it is on supposedly ‘naturalistic’ forms of interaction, can have unintended biases and effects. Although tests like the IELTS bill themselves as objective measures of language ability, students felt the need to attend intensive classes like Winston’s in order to project properly socialised global identities through their linguistic performances. The students I worked with experienced acute anxieties about what the examination frames as a simple conversation and went to great lengths to prepare their answers ahead of time. As we have seen, those answers are suffused with markers of presumably Westernised styles and stances that are intended to appeal to native-speaking English examiners like Patricia who bring with them negative register valuations towards explicitly Mandarin-inflected English. What might have happened if Yingchun had taken Winston’s class in preparation for her own interview? Not just a plant but an indoor forest. A jungle! With parrots squawking and monkeys swinging through the trees. Would she be studying architecture right now?

### Notes

- (1) The names of all schools and individuals given in this article are pseudonyms. Choice of pseudonym (Chinese or English) reflects the language of address speakers preferred.
- (2) Much of the discourse I examine here exhibits frequent codeswitching. As I am mostly interested in the content of speech, my transcription adheres to the following convention: English speech is in **bold** text, untranslated Mandarin speech in *italics* and translated Mandarin Chinese in roman script. There is also a local dialect called Dongbeihua frequently employed in informal interactions, but it was not used in any of the classroom discourse recorded for this chapter. I also adopt the following transcription conventions:
  - , short pause
  - . sentence-final pause
  - ... longer pause
  - ! exclamation
  - : phoneme lengthening
  - interruption (at beginning of speaker’s turn); false start or repetition
  - [ ] editorial comment or clarification
- (3) A unit of Chinese currency roughly equivalent to US\$0.15 or €0.13.
- (4) A more extensive description of the speaking portion of the IELTS exam along with sample task cards can be found at <http://takeielts.britishcouncil.org/prepare-test/understand-test-format/speaking-test>. For a history of the development of IELTS see Clapham (1996).
- (5) The reference to my skin colour here is significant. Most Shenyangers use skin colour as an index of both modern subjectivity and language ability, so that people with white skin are assumed to be from highly developed countries and to speak English

fluently (Henry, 2020). He also hoped that my presence would stimulate more English interaction in the classroom, as the students did usually prefer to communicate in Mandarin unless prompted.

- (6) This extract predates Hawking's death in 2018.

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