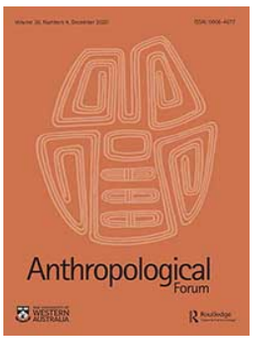

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The Otherness of Talk: Raciolinguistics and the White Foreign Body of English in China

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ABSTRACT

Though race is rooted in ideas of biological essentialism, language is one of the key modalities through which it is realised in everyday practice. Recent attention in linguistic anthropology has been directed at raciolinguistics: the ways race is constructed as a social category through discourse and interaction. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in English language schools located in the northeastern Chinese city of Shenyang, I explore the ways language practices are ascribed to groups of people based on racialised appearances through the schools' promotional activities. Advertising for these schools juxtaposes images of white bodies with brand names that performatively invoke a range of modernising sentiments, establishing an indexical connection between foreign language and new forms of subjectivity. Against the backdrop of Chinese discourses of neoliberal self-improvement, English allows people to narrate their transformations from local to global social actors while transcending the limitations of their own ethnic identities.

KEYWORDS

China; language; education; modernisation; race

Located in a newly established tree-lined suburb catering to upwardly mobile middle-class Chinese households, Oxford English is a private language school offering children's classes on evenings and weekends. Schools such as these have become a ubiquitous feature of the urban landscape in the northeastern Chinese city of Shenyang. As I wandered down a hallway between classrooms one afternoon in 2013, the children inside one room were loudly singing a variation of head and shoulders, knees and toes. I found a table tucked into a small alcove where several women, parents of students, were gathered waiting for the classes to end. I struck up a conversation and asked them their impressions of the school, but as we chatted, another woman, Mrs Luo, soon joined us. She was surprised to find her friends speaking Mandarin to a foreigner and immediately asked if I was a new teacher at the school. After I explained that I was not a teacher but doing research, she seemed very disappointed. 'The foreign teachers at this school, they are not so good. My child says their English is strange (*qiguai*). Some of them are black people (*heiren*), they come from Africa'. As the other women nodded in agreement, I asked if she knew which country in Africa. 'I don't know which country. The headmaster says they are American. They're just black. What can we do? How do we know if their English is good or not'?

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This short interaction, though one which was echoed during my fieldwork by a range of speakers in other settings, highlights several issues about the role of English in China: the integration of the language within an increasingly neoliberal system of education (Crabb 2010; Pérez-Milans 2013); the ways English has become entangled with overarching discourses of development and modernisation (Gao 2019; Pan 2015a); and how race has come to act as a proxy for both linguistic fluency and modernity. Oxford English, and other language schools of its kind, are key elements of contemporary educational practice that prepare students for high-stakes tests such as the national college entrance examination, where English still counts for a significant portion of a candidate's final score (Cheng 2008; Zhao 2016), and international language examinations that govern entrance to foreign universities. The larger schools employ foreign teachers to provide instruction in 'authentic' forms of English spoken by native speakers. But, as I will argue, schools also act as sites for the development and maintenance of language ideologies and racialising discourses, in particular through discussions of 'quality' (*suzhi*), that naturalise English as an inherent property of white foreigners.

Quality is not simply equivalent to excellence; rather, in China, it refers to new forms of citizenship centred around changing notions of self and subjectivity (Jacka 2009; Kipnis 2006; Lin 2017; Tomba 2009). People with abundant quality are patriotic, self-regulating actors who manifest appropriate forms of social taste, refinement, aesthetic judgment and so forth. Quality reflects a shift away from ideas of selfless sacrifice for the collective good prominent in the socialist era and towards the expression and satisfaction of individual desires (Hsu 2007; Rofel 2007; Steinmüller 2013). In other words, quality citizens do not require support from the state, but drive China's economic engine through new forms of commodity consumption. The discourse of quality is so prevalent throughout contemporary China that it has come to suffuse educational discourse as well, such that institutions and programs take raising the overall quality of their students as an explicit goal (Lin 2011; Murphy 2004; Woronov 2009). Foreign language education in China is therefore not simply about acquiring new knowledge or securing entrance to a foreign university. The complex assemblage of passions and anxieties driving educational practice in China today – what Andrew Kipnis (2011) dubs 'educational desire' – are geared towards staking out, even in children, claims to highly valued forms of citizenship and identity.

Quality also has distinct racial overtones. Although quality can be cultivated and developed through concentrated education and coordinated social effort, some people possess those values already, almost by default: white-skinned foreigners from 'civilised' countries. People with darker skin were associated, instead, with backwards and underdeveloped nations. White foreign teachers that students encounter in their foreign language classrooms appear to have the wealth, mobility, brand-consciousness, and freedom that comprise quality individuals, a sentiment heightened by the congruence between professional labour and lighter skin colour in China. Whiteness functions as both an icon of quality and a representation of the social practices of modernity; in theory, modernity can be acquired by anyone, merely by adopting those practices.

Racialising and civilising practices have long been mediated through language. Over fifty years ago, the Afro-Caribbean intellectual Frantz Fanon noticed a congruence between language and race, noting that

> The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter – that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language … A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. (Fanon 1967, 18)

More recently, Rosa and Flores (2017, 622) argue that, 'institutionalized hierarchies of racial and linguistic legitimacy are central to processes of modern subject formation', and advocate for a 'raciolinguistic perspective' that 'interrogates the historical and contemporary co-naturalization of language and race'. By placing racialising linguistic practices within a local framework of meaning, they emphasise that values of whiteness or alterity are always specific to particular times and places. How race and alterity are realised in China is a product of local, rather than universal, semiotic processes, and tied in to local concerns with whiteness and modernity. A Shenyanger who appears to speak English fluently, for instance, is naturally assumed to have had more extensive contact with social fields outside China: to know more about which foreign brands signify a sense of taste and refinement, or how to consume Western food, or how to do business with multinational companies. Shenyangers therefore draw upon the associations between whiteness, English, and modernisation in the consumption of foreign language classes. Whiteness guarantees the authenticity of a teacher's foreign language and, by extension, the high social values she can embody and transmit to students; but it also entices consumers with the promise that they can appropriate its values through their own concentrated efforts.

In this article, I examine discourses surrounding English and English language education as presented semiotically through foreign language school promotional materials. Much like Bonnie Urciuoli's (2014) analysis of the 'Good Student' as a product of marketing by American colleges, I argue that posters, signs and billboards advertising language education in Shenyang both draw upon and reinforce the white foreigner as a naturalised representation of English and of modernity. Although individual foreigners may come from a range of social class, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, this diversity is typically erased in favour of an image of the smiling, clean-cut, professionally dressed, light-skinned, and, most importantly, accentless native English speaker: in other words, a stereotyped representation of outsiders. English schools therefore offer, within their language classrooms, a contact zone where Chinese students can encounter and understand the foreign. By purchasing English lessons, Chinese consumers can position themselves as particular kinds of individuals: ones who are transforming themselves from backwards peasants into modern citizens through the medium of this foreign language.

In this sense, whiteness or darkness act as qualia, abstract sensate properties of people and things that can become linked to systems of social value (Chumley and Harkness 2013; Harkness 2015). Whiteness signifies all of the positive social values attached to English, modernisation, cosmopolitanism and neoliberal citizenship that are the target of such desire within China today. Acting in ways similar to how white people act, consuming in ways similar to how white people consume, and speaking in ways similar to how white people speak – becoming, in the words of Xin Liu (2002) 'others to themselves' – positions language students as, if not necessarily white themselves, at least equivalent to them. These practices are, however, always commodified representations experienced at a distance through the institution of the English school itself. The foreigners and foreign

encounters schools present to their students are carefully packaged through marketing practices into an idealised form, which is to say that the ways of acting, consuming, and speaking emulated by students are imaginary constructs: not imitations of individual white people, but semiotic representations of whiteness itself. White foreigners in China are therefore racially stereotyped objects of envy due to a privileged social position as representatives of the global, but they are also figures that can mediate between the global and the local for Chinese students through these acts of racial appropriation.

Data for this article are drawn from a combined three years of ethnographic fieldwork ranging from 2001 to 2013 in Shenyang, the capital city of Liaoning Province and a hub of manufacturing and commerce in northeastern China. Despite an urban population of over eight million people, economic reforms in the last several decades have led to the closure of many state-owned factories, and there is a general feeling that opportunities lag far behind the large metropoles of Beijing or Shenzhen. Parents therefore seize every advantage for their child's education, including private foreign language schooling. Very early in my research, I began taking pictures of English schools and English school advertising as I travelled throughout the city, and have built up a substantial collection of images of signs, posters, billboards, and banners from a variety of different English schools. I also collected marketing materials (flyers, newsletters, magazines) from the schools and visited their websites where available online. Following the work of Scollon and Scollon (2003) and, in particular, Lin Pan's (2010, 2015b) analysis of multilingual signs in Beijing, I argue that these signs are interpretable as semiotic texts embedded within a broader environment of meaning. The images, texts, logos, school names, and other design elements found on these signs (and their juxtapositions with each other) act as indexes pointing to complex forms of social value. They can be successfully read only with reference to that surrounding ideological system – what Penelope Eckert (2008) calls the indexical field (see also Silverstein 2003) – and my analysis points towards the indexical relations of race and otherness by examining the consistent features of those texts. I proceed by first explicating the characteristics of this indexical field and the frameworks Shenyangers bring to bear in interpreting these signs, followed by a look at some of the major elements of these texts. By combining and juxtaposing signifiers of whiteness with signifiers of self-transformation, schools essentially package the two messages together into a single coherent semiotic principle: that the realisation of new forms of individual subjectivity occurs through English and the mediating presence of the white foreigner.

Quality (*Suzhi*) and Modernity: Raciolinguistic Discourses in Shenyang

Mrs Luo's questioning of the black teachers at Oxford English is illustrative of raciolinguistic practices: the ways in which racial identities are created and sustained through language ideologies (Alim, Rickford, and Ball 2016; Bucholtz 2011; Wirtz 2014). Discourses about language are often tied to ethnoracial identities. In the United States, for instance, Latinx identity and Spanish are linked through discourses that assert an unwillingness to assimilate culturally and linguistically to the white, English-speaking majority (Rosa 2019). Linguistic forms and racialised identities are thus mutually constituting as one can always be used to evoke the other. In practice, of course, a person can be racialised in multiple ways. Roth-Gordon (2017) demonstrates how certain bodies in Rio de

Janeiro can be read as white in some settings or black in others, depending upon how the person speaks or acts. Despite inevitable forms of hybridity and heterogeneity, however, race and language are almost always perceived, in the moment, as essentialised pure categories.

China has its own longstanding discourses on language and race. As Frank Dikötter (1992) has noted, in antiquity, Chinese maintained a distinction between white-skinned aristocrats, speaking classical Chinese, and dark-skinned peasants, bronzed by outdoor labour, who spoke regional dialects. As China developed contact with other states, skin colour became an important proxy for civilisational discourse, with whiteness associated with the ordered imperial state and blackness with wild barbarians speaking unrecognisable tongues beyond its borders (Dikötter 1992, 8–12; see also Fiskesjö 1999). The deeper the colour, the farther from the civilising centre of the empire those people were perceived to be. Similarly, Victor Mair (1991) has argued that classical dialectology in China, the study of language varieties, was deeply rooted in a sense of place: the Mandarin word for dialect is, after all, *fangyan* or 'place-speech'. In this tradition of research, dialect was never simply a relation among similar languages, but between groups of people and their linguistic differences from classical Chinese. Both of these examples illustrate the co-naturalisation of language and race; the more different the people, the more different the language.

After suffering a series of military defeats at the hands of Western colonial powers in the nineteenth century, Chinese intellectuals began turning the insular gaze of imperial China outwards to a rapidly modernising world, adopting its technological advances while also studying its moral, political and economic dynamics (He 2002). Language was a key element of national modernisation strategies, with many young Chinese in industrialising urban areas being educated in English-medium British or American missionary schools (Henry 2013b; Weston 2004). Particularly in the cosmopolitan treaty ports of Shanghai and Tianjin, where urban concessions were managed by foreign powers, Chinese citizens experimented with new fashions, lifestyles, and technologies that drew inspiration from Europeans (Brady and Brown 2013; Lu 1999). In this context, the West took on an almost magical presence in Chinese discussions of nationalism and modernisation, 'an alien Other that was to be welcomed with open arms to replace the old self and usher in its rebirth' (Shih 2001, 130).

The socialist era interrupted, but did not extinguish, these trends. With the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1978 and the onset of economic reforms, English was deemed a critical language for national development, becoming a required subject in the public school curriculum and a major component of newly instituted university entrance examinations (Adamson 2004; Gil 2016; Pan 2015a). Unlike other postcolonial states, such as India or Nigeria, English never replaced the national language in colonial administration, and so neither a localised variety of English nor a domestic population of native speakers developed.[1] The idea of a standard English derived from the speech of Western native speakers has remained the ideal in both education and the popular imagination. Moreover, Western influence on everything from food culture (Hsu 2005) to suburban architecture (Wu 2010) to musical styles (Fung 2008) has become quite common. The importance of both the West, as a model and source of modernity, and English, as its communicative medium, are key elements of the indexical field informing raciolinguistic discourses in China today.

In Shenyang, the shift towards modern forms of subjectivity that characterises the post-socialist period is embodied in the form of two character types: the peasant (*nongmin*) and the urbanite (*shimin*). These are not simply matters of rural or urban residence but attitude, outlook, affiliation, and moral constitution narrated through discourses of quality. Peasants, exhibiting unrefined forms of bodily practice, dress, and talk, lack quality while urbanites, who have presumably transcended the peasant/socialist past, exhibit instead properly socialised forms of behaviour. Consequently, peasant skin is often described as dirty (*tu*) or dark (*hei*), while that of urbanites is white (*bai*); urban teachers I worked with often carried parasols in summer to ward off the sun, and invested in whitening make-up or skin creams. While peasants toil at agriculture or outdoor construction, urbanites work indoors at professional jobs, are well-groomed and wear immaculate clothes. They have sufficient wealth and free time to cultivate their intellectual, musical, and athletic talents. They surround themselves with authentic commodities, especially foreign brands. All of these practices act as indexical signs representing an individual's quality to others, allowing people to stake a claim to sophisticated urban identities.

One of the hallmarks of quality is a person's speech: there are a range of speech varieties in Shenyang, and the people I interviewed often charted out a progression from locally bound peasants speaking the regional dialect, known as Dongbeihua, to properly socialised Chinese citizens speaking standard Mandarin, and finally globally mobile transnationals who speak English, with the individual accruing, at each stage, higher levels of quality. 'Actually my mother is from Beijing, but my father is from Changchun, so he speaks a regional dialect', said Fanny, the head teacher at Washington English, one of Shenyang's more expensive English schools. 'At university, my professor didn't have an accent. My tutor, she didn't have an accent either. So, I think the higher a person's quality the less of an accent they have'. Fanny takes language as a clear index of quality, meaning that her own use of standard Mandarin and standard English – acquired through study abroad in Britain – demonstrated for others how she had transcended her provincial origins.

Not all English is the same, and achieving both educational credentials and these forms of modern subjectivity are thought to be highly dependent on acquiring what is perceived to be naturalistic, appropriate, and, above all, authentic English. 'Good English' is English that accords with native-speaker norms and therefore is thought to only be accessible through direct interaction with native-speaking teachers from other countries. But, as Mrs Luo asked, how can one be sure that the foreign teachers leading their child through English songs and vocabulary lessons speak English that will be recognised as 'real' by examination gatekeepers and other foreigners: English, in other words, that is equivalent to their own? This concern for authenticity is therefore likely what prompted Mrs Luo's criticism of the school and its teachers: if Mrs Luo's son were to acquire 'bad English' at the school from teachers who were not 'real' native speakers of English, the effects could reverberate years later on his examinations. But Mrs Luo, and the other parents at Oxford English, also felt unqualified to judge the teachers' English themselves. The parents I interviewed frequently spoke of their own English abilities as lacking; they went to school, I was told, before people had realised the importance of English and the widespread availability of supplementary private English classes like those available at Oxford English.

How can one therefore tell if a person's English is good or not? Modernity, as everyday social practice in Shenyang, implicates a range of differently racialised others. Urban Chinese are largely of the dominant Han ethnicity, accounting for over 90% of the population nationally, but there are 56 other officially recognised ethnic minorities in China who are often perceived to be both racially distinct and lacking in civilisation (see Carrico 2017; Harrell 2012; McCarthy 2009). Their Mandarin, like that of peasants, is thought to be invariably marked by their rural origins, peasant farmers who are isolated from globalised cosmopolitan lifestyles in the city (Bulag 2003; Dong 2017; Hansen 1999). In contrast, both English and modernity appear to be foreign social practices; they come from outside China and are represented by the figures (and bodies) of the foreigners that Chinese observe in advertising, through the media, and occasionally in person as teachers or employees of foreign companies in the city. Some foreigners seem to act as natural representatives of that modernity and, therefore, are individuals suffused with quality. Other foreigners appear, in contrast, to have their access to modernity just as constrained as Chinese themselves. Perhaps they have enough money to travel to China and may speak one kind of English, but are they really like those modern foreigners who appear to travel so effortlessly across national borders, spend vast sums of money and speak this global language so readily?

In asking whether the black teachers' English was good or not, Mrs Luo was therefore questioning whether they could act as appropriate models of the civilising and globalising potential of the language for Chinese children. Race acts as a convenient, although perhaps uncertain, heuristic for predicting the authenticity of a teacher's language and position within the global order of development, no matter their true fluency or level of education. Significantly, as I am white, Mrs Luo did not seem to have any doubts about my own English skills and was eager to convince me to teach at the school. She did not question my national origins or educational credentials. Nor would she have had concerns about other language varieties that might have sounded 'strange' to my own ears, such as those spoken by white teachers I met from Scotland, Ireland or South Africa. For Mrs Luo and the other parents I spoke with, linguistic fluency naturally inheres in certain kinds of people.[2]

The indexical connection between white people and modernity was rarely explicitly stated in Shenyang, but as Jane Hill (2008, 32–33) argues, racialising discourse exists as much in silences and intimations as it does in overtly racist speech. When Jasmine, the owner of a small school tucked inside the second floor of a pharmacy nearer to Shenyang's downtown, needed a new foreign teacher to replace one who had returned home, she asked me if I knew a *bairen* (white person) who would be suitable for the job. I asked if the teacher had to be white. Jasmine hesitated and then shrugged, 'Well, any kind of foreigner is okay, but … ' She left the sentence unfinished, but it was clear she was seeking an ideal type; not just a native speaker, but someone who, in the eyes of her customers, looked like one. Schools therefore recognise and build upon the racial dynamic of 'good English' in both their hiring and marketing. While few refused to hire native English speakers of colour, there were clear preferences in which teachers were given the best classes, were hired at the best schools, obtained the best salaries and received the most praise from paying customers. Schools also took great care to position their white foreign teachers, through advertising and promotional events, as objects of desire and to associate the schools with their presumed quality and global reach.

English Schools as Urban Fantasy Spaces

Like five-star hotels, fast-food chains, or luxury shopping malls, English schools work hard to cultivate an image of foreign authenticity. Customers can, in turn, appropriate these forms of authenticity to assert their own modern urban subjectivity. The schools I studied went to great lengths to tout the interactions students would have with their foreign teachers. They featured their faces (almost always those of white teachers) on billboards and advertisements, made sure that parents and students saw them coming and going, and made them host regular promotional events. But modern subjectivity is not dependent upon race alone. Signs of modernity are coordinated across a range of domains – such as technology, wealth, mobility, and fashion – that become linked together in the popular imagination. The foreign, as a complex semiotic register, was embedded in the design and everyday routines of these schools as well. This allowed for race to be implicated in, and appropriated through, a range of social practices. Schools stocked libraries with Western newspapers and magazines, screened Hollywood films in the evenings, and hosted presentations for students on aspects of foreign culture such as Thanksgiving, baseball and coffee; one school even opened a coffee shop beside its entrance so that students and their foreign teachers could mingle together. Schools are therefore not simply sites of contact with foreign native-speaking teachers; they are environments symbolically constructed to represent foreign modernity.

Private English schools began to open in Shenyang in the 1990s as economic reforms created opportunities for private business ventures and households became capable of generating forms of social distinction through disposable income (Hu and McKay 2012). Although some other foreign languages are taught in both public and private schools, English predominates at every level and is the only required foreign language in the school curriculum (Gil 2016). Today, almost every child in Shenyang is engaged in some kind of after-school or private English language training. Large private English schools are multi-branch operations catering to thousands of students, but there are hundreds of smaller schools operating out of private homes or in small retail spaces around the city. Schools are required to register with the education ministry and submit teacher credentials, lesson plans, and a substantial fee once a year to maintain their licenses, but smaller schools often avoid such oversight. Government officials and school administrators that I spoke to estimated there were about one thousand private language schools of varying sizes operating in the city.

Several of the larger schools initially recruited 'foreign experts' (*waiguo zhuanjia*), qualified native English-speaking teachers, to ensure that the English being taught was properly standardised. But as the number of schools rapidly expanded in the late 1990s and 2000s, the demand for foreign English teachers opened opportunities to any native speaker with a university degree, and by far most of the foreign teachers in Shenyang today are recent graduates with very little knowledge of linguistics or teaching experience. Most of my contacts in the industry estimated that there are between 500 and 1000 foreign teachers in Shenyang, working at the larger private language schools, elite boarding schools, universities and even full-service daycares throughout the city.[3] Although the majority of classes in language schools are still taught by Chinese instructors, foreign teachers are a selling point for private schools, a guarantee that the language they teach is authentic (Henry 2013a; Stanley 2013). In children's schools the foreign

teachers usually co-teach classes along with a series of Chinese teachers, moving from classroom to classroom and leading the students in songs, games, dialogues, and pronunciation practice for an hour at a time. For higher-level classes, interactions may be more extensive but are also generally contrasted with Chinese pedagogical patterns as fun and exciting.

English schools employ a range of strategies to establish their credentials as sources of authentic English and to appeal to the aspirational desires of potential customers. Consider, for instance, the case of Charlotte, a Chinese English teacher in her late 20s and the assistant manager of a school called Premier English. Her classes contained far more than grammatical instruction and vocabulary exercises. She would frequently describe her travels and project slide shows of pictures for the students of places she had visited: the Tower of London and St. Paul's Cathedral, Times Square and Central Park in New York. The underlying logic of this strategy, she explained, was to familiarise the students with life in foreign countries.

> I've been Trafalgar Square. They've never been to Trafalgar Square. For them, Trafalgar Square is just a weird sound. It's just tra-fal-gar. No meaning! Tra-fal-gar. They know nothing but the sound. They know nothing about the history of the square, and I was there. I was really looking to tell them why they should visit, 'cause Trafalgar Square is like Tian'anmen Square in China. And then they know more.

These strategies served to lend her authority as an instructor, since she had real contact with foreign places that her students did not, but to also reflect the students' own desires; they extended to students the possibility of successfully traversing the globe as a cosmopolitan world traveller themselves through English study.

These efforts even begin before students enter the classroom as schools use advertising and promotional materials that draw upon texts and images to imply their customers are doing the work of developing highly valued social personae through acts of consumption. Advertisements work by drawing on already circulating discourses and indexical associations (like quality or the raciolinguistic discourses noted above) and drawing a connection between the product and their positive features. In the words of Asif Agha:

> Ads personify products in order to insert them in a person's life. They bring products under commodity formulations designed to help them pass across a point of sale by inviting persons who encounter the ad to convert at least one token of the commodity into a personal possession. Yet if the ad seeks to convert its viewer/reader into the commodity's user/owner, the ad's overall formulation must engage with the social life of the viewer/reader. The ad requires a principle of indexical selectivity that will summon a reader as its addressee. (Agha 2011, 29)

Promotional materials thus deploy a collection of signs that, through their metasemiotic juxtaposition and interaction, solidify into a particular brand identity and distinguish the consumer of that brand as a particular kind of person (Manning and Uplisashvili 2007; Nakassis 2012). Moreover, brand names do not simply label a product but, as Agha suggests, are performative speech acts in their own right: they invite, they engage, they tempt (Austin 1962).

A good example of these principles can be found on advertising billboards that are now ubiquitous throughout Shenyang. The tempo of urban construction is rapid, and each construction site is ringed by temporary walls that serve as advertising spaces for

local brands and businesses. Because they are relatively cheap and visible, as compared to television or radio advertising, they offer good value for English schools trying to raise their public profile. The billboard for Talenty Children's English (Figure 1) is fairly typical of English school advertising. The dominant message running in large red characters across the middle is 'a high-value new experience' (*chaozhi xin tiyan*) preceded by an image of a child captured mid-jump. The school's name and logo are at the top left, while address and contact information are contained in a blue banner running across the bottom. The relatively temporary nature of these advertisements is evident in the text at the top right which 'warmly welcomes' student registration for its summer camp program, a series of intensive classes that run throughout the summer school break. These are marketed underneath as: 'This summer break = relaxation + fun + knowledge'. The final chunk of text at the bottom right invites observers to warmly celebrate participants in the school's Third All-China English Competition and Opening of the Second All-China Middle School Speech Competition.

The messages I have identified are relatively straightforward bits of factual information (name, address, and telephone number of the school) or familiar forms of promotional style in advertising (a high-value experience, the relaxation-fun-knowledge content of the summer program). Note, though, the performativity of several lines of text; observers are invited to celebrate the school's students and welcomed to register their own children. The billboard invites them into a participatory framework, engaged in dialogue with like-minded others who share similar motivations, goals and aspirations for themselves and their children and can imagine themselves, after

Figure 1. Advertising billboard for Talenty/*Gailun* Children's English.

purchasing the school's services, being congratulated, in turn, by other observers of the advertisement.

Read within the local sociocultural context and, in particular, discourses of neoliberal self-transformation, several second-order indexical messages emerge. To start, consider the school's name. Like Chinese given names (Blum 1997; Gao 2011), Mandarin language brand names are derived from the stock of Chinese characters with existing denotational values (Sang and Zhang 2008). This allows them to function as metacommunicative speech acts, serving both as proper nouns labelling particular businesses and as messages from those businesses to customers. English schools can offer another layer of metaphorical complexity because they frequently have both English and Chinese names. In some cases, the English name is a calque or direct translation of the Mandarin, such as *Xin Dongfang* / New Oriental. In others, the two names might be based on phonetic transliteration (such as *Bingying Jiaoyu* / Being Education, with the first English word a phoneticisation and the second word a direct translation) or attempts to capture some of the Chinese name's semantic content.

Weibo Guoji Yingyu provides a good example. The final two words mean 'international English'. *Wei* literally means a kind of soft leather, but it is the first character in a classical idiom, *weibian san jue*, that means to study with diligence. One of the meanings of *bo* is wide, extensive; the character can be combined with others to create the words *boxue* (erudite) and *boshi* (doctorate). Taken together then, *weibo* connotes scholarly acumen, insight and wide-ranging experience. The English name for the same school is Web International English, intended to both mirror the Chinese name's pronunciation (*weibo* / web) and add its own suggestion of interconnectedness and technological adroitness in reference to the world wide web. By laminating these two types of names together, schools like Web International English add depth to the metacommunicative messages directed at customers. Customers can think of themselves as sophisticated, high-quality urban Chinese, but also ones who partake in a world of globalised modernity and cosmopolitan citizenship.

Returning to the billboard for Talenty Children's English (Figure 1), the school has both an English and a Chinese name (*Gailun Shao'er Yingyu*). The final two words (*Shao'er Yingyu*) are, again, an exact translation: children's English. Talenty obviously evokes the notion of talent (*tiancai*) that is considered a property of high-quality, cultured individuals. The diminutive -y on the end also lends the name a childish, even slightly cutesy, valence in line with the age level of the school's students. The Chinese name, however, is more oblique. In the first word, *gai* can be both a noun and a verb: a cover, a lid, or to cover something. In this sense, several of my informants agreed that the school's name implies that it is at the top of its field, covering all competitors, or that its students top the abilities of those from other schools. *Lun*, refers to a sense of ordered human relationships as dictated by Confucian philosophy, and therefore has very positive associations. Taken in tandem, the English and Chinese names evoke a range of emotional and moral associations: superiority, principled relationships, order, talent and so forth.

Brand names do far more than identify a particular school or its characteristics. Recall that advertisements 'engage with the social life of the reader/viewer' (Agha 2011, 29). They call out to the pedestrian wandering past a billboard, which often rings a newly designed high-rise apartment complex or luxury hotel, inviting them (and their child)

to engage with these positive concepts and values. School names are performative in the context of the indexical fields of race, education and quality outlined above; they invite consumers to make connections between the school and highly desirable foreign people and places, to effectively imagine themselves having the freedom and mobility to travel there and interact with them. Yet they are also approachable and familiar, with Chinese names that reflect local forms of value. School names function as speech acts: they speak to the educational consumer through a language they can understand, while effectively making students a promise about where they can go, what they can accomplish, who they can meet, and how they can be transformed just by the act of walking through the doors and signing up for classes. The guarantee that these promises are not empty but that schools can engender the transformations at the heart of their identities is to be found in how those messages are then juxtaposed with racialised foreign bodies.

Racialised Bodies and Linguistic Embodiment

In August of 2010, a reporter for the local *Huashang Chenbao* newspaper encountered two white foreign English teachers relaxing by the side of a major pedestrian shopping street in Shenyang. One was sitting on a skateboard and bleeding from a scrape on his leg; both were drinking beer on a hot and sunny day while onlookers sat nearby, staring curiously at these two outsiders. With one of the foreigners' Chinese girlfriend interpreting – left conspicuously unnamed in the article – the reporter interviewed the two foreign teachers before filing a story for the newspaper entitled 'Foreigners in Shenyang make more than 4000–10,000 RMB every month'. That salary range is above average, but by no means out of reach to many entrepreneurs and young professionals. However, the focus of the article was less on the justification for their salaries but instead on who these foreigners were: 'where do they work, how much can they earn, do they make enough money, and are they happy in Shenyang'? Several Chinese urbanites (*shimin*) were also interviewed: some noted that the high salary was a consequence of the 'dignity' (*timian*) of the teacher's status. Others speculated that perhaps the foreigners suffered the same 'bitterness' (*xinku*) and high demands that Chinese employees did. The tone is not of outrage but curiosity: who are these people, and why are they here? Are they like us, or are they different?

Encounters with alterity are, as several of the papers in this issue demonstrate, opportunities to gather information, to make strangers knowable social actors. In this newspaper article, we see the author and audience concerned not just with the lives of foreigners (their wealth, their purposes, their impressions of China) but with their motivations, desires and objectives. The people interviewed latch onto familiar experiences and concepts as ways locating foreigners within an existing moral universe. Coming to knowing foreigners better holds out the possibility of unlocking the secrets of their individual quality, opening them up to forms of racialised appropriation as Shenyangers model their own actions and motivations on the frameworks offered through these media (see Bashkow 2006; Rafael 2005; Rutherford 2003). It is no accident, for instance, that the jumping child in Figure 1 is white; Chinese parents often bemoaned the high pressures of China's education system and envied Western schools where homework is scarce and play plentiful.[4] The bouncing white girl conjures notions of a properly socialised,

polite, and educated – but playful and creative – child that reflects parental aspirations (Liu 2015; Vong 2008). As urban fantasy spaces where Chinese citizens can engage with foreigners, English schools are therefore a key venue through which knowledge of the foreign can be developed. In this section, I examine how English school advertising implicitly offers this kind of knowledge by prominently featuring images of particular kinds of foreigners.[5] If white bodies possess, almost by default, the distinctions of quality, the use of this imagery extends the opportunity to Chinese consumers to acquire those same distinctions through consumption activities.

Schools often made use of their own foreign teachers in promotional materials. I once ran into Ashton, a young white Californian, in the teacher's office of a children's school as he prepared for class. He was dressed in a dark, somewhat ill-fitting suit with a white shirt and red tie – attire completely out of place among the typically casual foreign teachers. He told me that the school's owner had given him the outfit in preparation for a photo-shoot that afternoon and, sure enough, within a few weeks his image was plastered on banners and billboards all over the city, staring professionally into the camera with the school's logo balanced in his upraised palm. Flyers often feature photographs and short biographies of a school's foreign teachers and these individuals are also predominantly, though not exclusively, white.

Pattison English's website offers an instructive example of this type of semiotic practice (Figure 2). On the school's main webpage, below information on the school's history, list of awards, and description of curriculum is a banner reading 'Our special-grade teachers will ensure you to get good scores'. The pictures of the teachers are part of a widget that rotates with each mouse click. Of the five teachers seen here, four are light-skinned Westerners (three British and one American) and one is Chinese. Two further teachers can rotate into view: a white male from Canada and another female Chinese teacher. Beneath each photograph is the teacher's name and text which identifies them as part of 'The Patterson [*sic*] Team'. The foreign teachers' names are given in English while the Chinese teachers have both a Chinese and an English name. There is a quick one- to two-sentence biography followed by an 'immediately consult' button that opens a chat screen through to a school

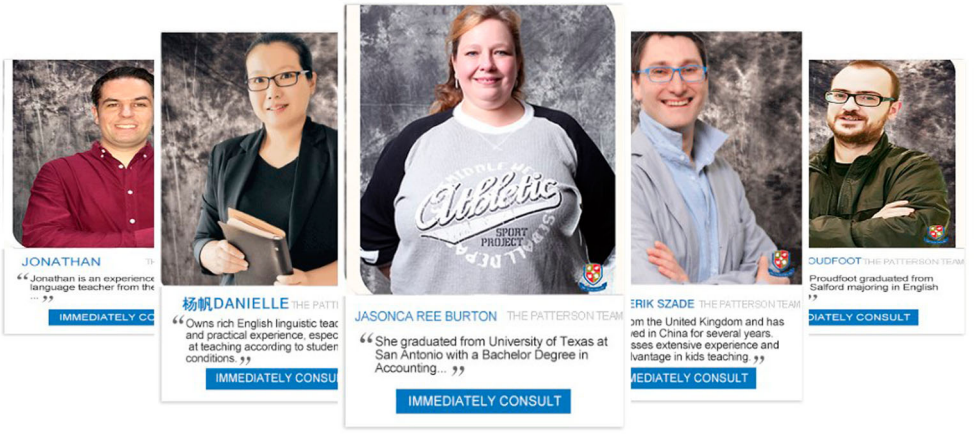

Figure 2. Teacher profiles on the website of Pattison English (www.sypts.com/en/). Accessed 21 January 2020.

representative. While the Chinese teacher biographies discuss pedagogy (Danielle's reads 'Owns rich English linguistic learning and practical experience, especially adept at teaching according to students' own conditions'), those of the foreign teachers prominently mark their places of origin: 'She graduated from University of Texas at San Antonio … ' and 'experienced English language teacher from the United Kingdom'.

Recruiting a school's own foreign teachers for its advertising was not, however, always easy. Ashton was uncomfortable after the advertising campaign went up, and felt he had not been paid enough for the use of his image. Mr Bai, the owner of Washington English, told me about the difficulties of using his teachers in advertising. They were unruly and did not take the job seriously; one of his teachers refused to cut his long hair to appear on a poster, and so they had to tie it back and slick it with hair gel to make him presentable. Schools therefore increasingly make use of images from stock photography services and websites to compose their advertising – and yet these too follow the same racial logic outlined above.

Advertising for Yinglun Foreign Language Training, a mid-size school that specialises in exam preparation, has a wide cast of characters under a yellow sunburst with an inverted map of the world in the background (Figure 3). These posters adorned the second-floor windows of a retail complex on a busy urban street in Shenyang. The school's Chinese and English names are bannered across the top along with the words 'IELTS', 'new TOEFL' (the names of international language examinations), and 'foreign teacher oral language' in Chinese characters. The inverted global map may be a layout error, but the figures depicted below appear to be carefully chosen. On the left are images of three people, a blonde woman and man with a slightly darker-complexioned woman in between (although she would still likely be read as white in Shenyang),

Figure 3. Advertising posters for Yinglun Foreign Language Training.

all giving a thumbs-up. On the right are five people dressed as students with books and satchels, wearing jeans and other casual (but fashionable) clothes. Two are white men and two are white women (one of each with blonde hair, one of each with brown hair) with an Asian woman second from the right. Yinglun's advertising positions the Asian consumer of their services in the midst of a group of white foreigners, conveying a sense of affinity and equality. Shenyangers viewing these images from the street are, in effect, invited to imagine themselves in the same position: co-eval with the white English speakers surrounding them, perhaps studying together at a foreign university.

In case these messages are too subtle, a final example from English First, a large English school with branches throughout China, makes the connection explicit (Figure 4). This

Figure 4. Poster for English First found in Beijing Capital Airport.

image was part of a national advertising campaign by the school in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic Games. The title across the top reads '24-hour personal English instruction', along with the Olympic logo on the left, followed by 'individualised tutoring; interactive activities; internet; truly study English anytime, anywhere'. An Asian woman and white man are shown side-by-side with their wrists bound together with many coils of rope. A yellow circle advises students to 'enroll immediately and receive a free course valued at 8000 *yuan* [about AU$1680]'. This is followed by information on the opening of a new branch school, the school's logo, contact information and locations of other branches throughout the city.

Although it is tempting to read this image as a comment on Asian sexuality – and I cannot deny it is a subtext for the overall message – my informants were far more inclined to see the difference between these individuals in racial rather than gendered terms: that is, they primarily saw a Chinese person and a white foreigner bound together. This interpretation is supported by other elements of the advertisement's message. The offers of 'individualised tutoring' and 'personal instruction' pose a distinct contrast to traditionally Chinese approaches to customer service (or lack thereof) that were prevalent in retail until the 1990s and are still found in public services. There is reference to social interaction (not rote learning), technology, and the freedom to study at one's convenience. All of these attributes position the school as representing Western values of individuality and freedom, embodied by the white foreigner. The poster then offers customers the potential to acquire these values for themselves, not simply by paying for classes but binding themselves to the foreigner as an instructive model. In other words, the real value is not the free 8000 *yuan* class but the transformations Chinese consumers can achieve in their own subjectivity through English language study and acquisition.

Conclusion

In his 2002 ethnography *The Otherness of Self: A Genealogy of the Self in Contemporary China* (which inspires my own title here), the anthropologist Xin Liu describes the generation of students who lived through the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protests and subsequent crackdowns, noting that many of those most vocal in their demands for democracy had abandoned their political idealism in the 1990s and become entrepreneurs who are, nevertheless, deeply entangled with the bureaucratic state.

> China puzzles those who have tried to understand the significance of its recent past because it is often difficult not to be surprised how oneself is able to become its own Other – not in the sense of changing one's profession or job but in the sense that the character of a person may change entirely within a short period of time – for example, a few years. (2002, 128)

Liu stresses that this sense of otherness is not simply a surface-level change but a profound reconfiguration of the individual's moral constitution and subjectivity, and one tied to a particular historical moment in China's development when private enterprise became not only a viable alternative to employment in state enterprises but one of the only means of securing a prosperous future in a rapidly modernising environment. The socialist and democratic ideals that inspired earlier generations appeared, to Liu, to have given way to a relentless pragmatism, moral relativism, and the self-centred pursuit of wealth and power (Liu 2002, 134; see also Kipnis 2012; Yan 2009). In the

last twenty years, these transformations (of both self and society) have only intensified; but they have also been reoriented outwards to encompass the linguistic and cultural subjectivities of English-speaking foreigners. A Shenyanger, encouraging me to make a return visit as soon as I could, avowed that foreigners who come to China will no longer feel like strangers. Rather, they will encounter Chinese people who have money, can speak English, and in many cases have travelled abroad themselves. Foreigners will see in Chinese a subjectivity rooted in similar ideas and experiences to their own.

The question I posed in this paper is how Chinese language students understand alterity in linguistic terms, and the uses it can be put to in configuring modern forms of social identity. A careful examination of promotional strategies by private English language schools in Shenyang reveals the deliberate use of white foreigners as indexes of not only English fluency but also modernisation and globalisation. Such indexical relations are efficacious because they draw upon a surrounding indexical field that incorporates Chinese discourses of self-transformation and new forms of subjectivity. The repeated use of white foreigners as global representatives of a highly desired modernity deepens the existing semiotic connections to the point that whiteness itself becomes an iconic quale of English. Whiteness, as skin colour, legitimates particular forms of speech as standard and normative, granting some foreigners (and the schools that deploy their images) a naturalised authenticity to their speech as opposed to the 'strangeness' of others. Branding practices – including use of brand names – performatively call out to potential consumers, encouraging them to essentially buy their way to English fluency and craft identities as high-quality urbanites through the figure of the foreigner. This is only possible because racial identities in Shenyang are so malleable in terms of their performativity: both the application of individual effort (in seeking education) and the civilising interventions of the state (in promoting quality) can 'raise' an individual's racialised identity to higher levels of modernity and sophistication.

Actual foreigners in Shenyang, like Ashton, are relatively unaware of the semiotic role they play, understanding only that white faces have some kind of value within a market of racialised imagery. But while their faces (and bodies) play a role in the twinned educational projects of foreign language and modernity, it also seems clear that these signifiers are widely open to appropriation. Part of the project of making foreigners knowable is to understand the self-cultivating practices and systems of meaning that sustain their individual quality. That knowing can then be modelled by urban Chinese in their own quest to be accepted as global citizens. In truth, foreign teachers represent a range of perspectives and personalities; many long-time Chinese students gradually come to realise that foreigners can be just as crass, lazy, and ignorant as the lowest-quality member of Chinese society. Nevertheless, as qualia, whiteness can be separated from the specific individuals, acting instead as a reflexive category of indexical values; as Jasmine noted, any white teacher will do. The white body of the foreigner, plastered on billboards and posters around the city, is an easily appropriable signifier allowing language learners to assert their own familiarity with the world outside China through consumption practices. Race becomes yet one more element of the commodity formulation of language in a highly competitive educational marketplace in China. It is therefore through discovering the otherness of talk – by learning English – that contemporary urban Shenyangers can become others to themselves and, as Xin Liu suggests, a new kind of person.

Notes

1. Pidgin, a trade jargon deriving from both English and southern Chinese dialects, was spoken in coastal cities throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but never appears to have developed into a full creole. It rapidly declined in use after the Communist Revolution in 1949 (Bolton 2003).
2. The converse of this is, of course, the expectation that people of Asian descent will be able to speak Mandarin and those of different racial heritage will not. Several highly proficient white Mandarin speakers are regularly featured in Chinese media and product marketing, and are marked as linguistic wunderkinds for just this reason.
3. This estimate is based on discussions with several industry insiders as the government does not publish official statistics on numbers of foreign workers. Foreign teachers require special visas and work documents, meaning that only the largest private English schools in Shenyang have the resources to hire foreigners directly. Once there, however, teachers may change schools or work for smaller schools on the side.
4. Indeed, one of the most common motivations people offered for moving abroad was that their child could obtain a first-rate education without the constant pressure students experience in China.
5. This is not to say that images of people of colour are not available in Shenyang, but nearly all of the examples I found were of recognisable individuals: athletes and celebrities like Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, and Venus Williams. These were almost never used in English school advertising but instead to promote athletic equipment and other foreign commodities.

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