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Global informal learning environments and the making of Chinese middle class

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ABSTRACT

This paper engages with the ways in which formal learning environments increasingly have to compete with informal ones, where such informal learning environments can be seen as penetrations from global 'scapes' into local conditions of circulation and uptake of semiotic resources. The study is based on close observation of a group of upwardly mobile Chinese consumers who have access to informal learning environments and acquire discourses to express their tastes in cultural goods. As effects of their access to the informal learning environments, the informants expand their identity repertoires and bind one space to another through their sociocultural practices. Such identity effects are the outcome of scaled forms of access to globally circulating semiotic resources whose indexical value needs to be enacted, renegotiated, and learned. In explaining the rescaling of the informants, access to informal global learning environments is as important as their access to advanced formal education, and the combination of such scaled resources informs their emergence as a globally recognizable middle class.

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Learning traditionally is understood as processes taking place in school, and its outcomes are subject to formal assessment. This form of learning, what we call 'formal learning', may play a big role in people's development, employment, income, and social position (Anderson, 2006; Bandura, 1977; Black & Wiliam, 2009; Chaib, Danermark, & Selander, 2011; McKeow, 2013; Stockmayer, Rennie, & Gilbert, 2010). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) pointed out long ago that formal learning serves the purpose of social reproduction; formal schooling induces people into the codes and norms of the social class system. Whereas formal learning is crucial for one's life opportunities and general wellbeing, an important part of learning has always taken place out of school. Learning beyond school, or informal learning, exerts remarkable influences on people's learning patterns and practices, and is increasingly recognized by scholars as well as practitioners (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcom, 2002; Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcom, 2003; Enos, Kehrhahn, & Bell, 2003; Leslie, Aring, & Brand, 1998; Lohman, 2006; Marsick & Volpe, 1999; Watkins & Marsick, 1992; Yi, 2008). Digitalized media intensifies informal learning and offers an important environment for acquiring new knowledge, accessing information, and sharing ideas with people across the globe (Ala-Mutka, Punie, & Ferrari, 2009; Ally, 2004; Anderson, 2006; Bandura, 1977; Bayne, Ross, & Williamson, 2009; Blaylock & Newman, 2005; Bloch, 2007; Kress & Selander, 2012; Stockmayer et al., 2010). In an increasingly globalized and digitalized world, formal learning environments have to compete with informal ones, and such informal learning environments penetrate from global 'scapes'

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(in the sense of Appadurai, 1996 who argued for a global flow of people, images, money, technologies, and ideologies) into local conditions of circulation (see Canagarajah, this issue, for a discussion of other implications for non-formal learning in professional mobility).

We use ‘informal learning’ in the present study to refer to learning that occurs outside and beyond schools, especially on the Internet, without overt assessment (but often with covert evaluation, see Leppänen, 2012 for the notion of ‘self-policing’). Online interactions constitute an important part of learning for our informants, as in a digital era, ‘valuable’ information comes from various sources and the ways of knowing – what is, learning – differ from those of previous generations. Online informal learning environments challenge the role of schooling, as well as the trust that people used to have in school-based knowledge. Learning outside school, especially on the Internet, increasingly affects school learning (Kress & Selander, 2012; Stocklmayer et al., 2010). The informants of this study, for instance, have received at least 16 years formal education (six years primary school, six years middle school, and four years university), have mainstreamed themselves into a socialist egalitarian ideology, and have succeeded in obtaining academic and professional credentials; they are highly mobile on the basis of the educational, cultural, and linguistic capital they have acquired through advanced schooling. The informal learning environments, however, revise their school-based knowledge and provide a global template for behavioral patterns and identity making.

The competing formal and informal learning environments are organized in a sociocultural scale, in which we observe that people display agency in appropriating cultural goods and in renegotiating identities to their advantage. The notion of scale has been developed in the fields of history, social geography, and political economy (Swyngedouw, 1996; Uitermark, 2002; Wallerstein, 2001). It has been introduced into sociolinguistics and is subject to scientific debates (Blommaert, 2010; Collins et al., 2009; Canagarajah, 2013). In this study, scale is used to explain the phenomenon that the informants are capable of performing everyday linguistic tasks in one situation, but are unable to do so in another. Similar phenomena include people’s varied capacities of deploying semiotic resources in different sociolinguistic spaces (Blommaert et al., 2005; see Clonan-Roy et al., this issue, who also view scale in semiotic terms.). We argue for a global-national-local scalar structure: at a national scale, formal learning offers important resources that influence the informants’ potential income, general wellbeing, spatial as well as social mobility. At a global scale, popular culture, especially in its commercial dimension, offers globally available templates for behavior and, as effects, expansions of the identity repertoires of people around the globe. The two scales of learning operate synchronically at a local scale of identity production and negotiation: while we observe agency and observe that the informants enjoy freedom in choosing what to learn, this freedom is constrained and they are not always able to upscale or downscale freely. The access to different scales entails access to scaled learning resources: resources connected with informal (global) learning environment and resources connected with (nation-state) advanced education; the combination of such scaled resources explains the emergence of a globally recognizable middle class. In other words, formal education usually provides people with the ‘hard’ diacritics of social class; the hard diacritics however have to be negotiated in ‘soft’ diacritics which are acquired through the informal learning environments.

This study is based on close observation of a group formed around a hobbyist blog. The group of young professionals are active in private business in China, are socially and spatially mobile, and set themselves off against ‘ordinary’ Chinese citizens by means of elaborate discourses and semiotic enactments, organized around specific luxury commodities (Blommaert & Varis, 2011). Whereas a detailed discussion of the state’s formal schooling system is beyond the scope of the paper, it is important to note that all informants of the current study have accomplished high achievements in the extremely competitive education and examination system. Being successful in advanced formal education offers them a ‘ticket’ to enter the highly competitive urban labor markets; formal credentials however are inadequate in claiming and establishing an urban middle class identity. They have to distinguish themselves from ‘ordinary’ Chinese and they acquire such ‘features of distinction’ in informal learning environments. We use the term ‘elite migrants’, to differentiate our informants from the ‘labor migrants’ who move from rural areas to cities for low-skilled and low income jobs (cf. Dong, 2011 for a study of labor migrants). Labor migrants differ from the elite migrants in both formal education and informal education: labor migrants tend to spend fewer years on formal schooling, and tend to possess less taste-related capital which is often acquired in exclusive social spaces.

An expanding body of literature has addressed the phenomenal labor migration inside China (Fan, 2004, 2005; Han, 2001; Henderson & Nadvi, 2011; Lu, 2005; Lu & Zhang, 2001; Zhang, Qu, & Zou, 2003; Woronov, 2004); and the sociolinguistic aspects of labor migrants have increasingly been explored (e.g. Dong, 2009, 2011; Dong & Blommaert, 2009; Dong & Blommaert, 2010). However, we know little about the sociolinguistic aspects of elite migrants beyond the fact that they have a number of language varieties at their disposal, and they draw on these linguistic resources to achieve upward social movements in the host society. Elite migrants often escape research attention, because the emphases of migrant studies traditionally are placed on marginality and inequality (but see Zhang, 2005 for a discussion of Chinese yuppies; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2009 for stylization and elitist stance in discursive reproduction; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011 for tourism discourse; and Kaup, 2013 for elite migrants and transnational class formation in Bolivia). Obtaining more in-depth understanding of elite migrants becomes a pressing issue as they bring diverse cultural and linguistic features, and together with labor migrants, they transform urban centers into superdiverse metropolises (Vertovec, 2006, 2007).

In what follows, we combine online and offline ethnographic data to demonstrate the various ways through which the elite migrants construct a group identity centered around a global elite identity script, composed of prestigious car brands and other lifestyle markers. This set of lifestyle markers operates as a flexible device for ‘distinction’, and enables an imagination of global group membership with mobility at the center. In explaining the upward social mobility of these elite migrants, access to informal (global) learning environments is as important as their access to (nation-state) advanced education, and

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