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Chinese Speakers in America: *Diglossia as Style*

BY **Kang (Franco) Liu**

The Constitution of the People's Republic of China defines China as a *tongyi duominzu guojia*, a "united country with diverse nationalities." Here, "nationality" refers to *minzu*, an ethnic group with a common territory, history, culture, and sometimes even language different from those of other groups. Amongst 56 such ethnic groups across China, the Han are nationally recognized as the only majority, taking up 91.51% of the national population, while the other 55 are considered ethnic minorities (National Bureau of Statistics). The Constitution further states that all *minzu* are equal and enjoy equal status and independent administrative rights within respective autonomous regions. Such constitutional provisions, as reflected in national policies, grant ethnic groups the latitude to preserve their distinct language cultures, under the consensus of a united Chinese national identity. However, for the Chinese-speaking Han people, linguistic diversity within their cultures has been largely trivialized and suppressed by Chinese linguistic hegemony.

In fact, "Chinese" is not a monolithic linguistic entity but rather an umbrella term that includes all variations of the Han Chinese language. Such variations are mostly regional, often provincial, and are therefore named *fangyan*, meaning "regional speech," or "dialect." Since 1912, due to the mutual unintelligibility between most dialects, numerous phonetic schemes have been developed by the Committee for the Unification of Pronunciation, under the Ministry of Education. These schemes aim to facilitate the standardization of a unified spoken language, better communication across regions, and project a united national identity (Zhang 565). In 1932, the Beijing dialect became officially recognized as the basis for the national spoken language, later named *Putonghua* (Mandarin). The new standard pronunciation, from then on, was defined as "the speech of natives of

Beijing who have received a middle-school education," and was further endorsed by obligatory school education and *Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi*, or the Mandarin Proficiency Test (DeFrancis 76).

This decision to bring the Beijing dialect to the fore requires Chinese speakers to conform to Beijing Mandarin phonology, which includes *erhua*, or rhotacization. Since such linguistics features are only native to speakers of Beijing dialect and some other Northern Chinese varieties, promotion of such linguistic features puts speakers of other Chinese varieties at a disadvantage as they have to learn the prescribed usage of an unfamiliar dialect to be understood outside their original speech communities (Zhang). Therefore, under the Chinese language policy, upbringing and habitation in certain regions presuppose access to particular language resources exclusive to said regions, and such access is oftentimes bound by inequality (Dong 6).

Following the standardization process and the government's endorsement of Mandarin as the national spoken language, China Daily reported in 2004 that 53.06% of the Chinese population is able to speak Mandarin to some extent, and according to the Ministry of Education in 2004, the percentage climbs to 80.44% in major provinces. The gradual rise of Mandarin as well as the remaining variations in different regions and ethnic groups all point to diglossia as a prominent feature of Chinese multilingualism. The term "diglossia" describes multilingualism occurring at a societal scale. It refers to the language situation in which at least two varieties of a language coexist in one linguistic culture and share domains of linguistic behavior in a complementary distribution (Schiffman 116). This distribution of language varieties is also stratified, and within said distribution, the domains involved in the speech community are ranked from high varieties (H) to low varieties (L) (Fishman). Domains such as public speaking, education or other prestigious usage are categorized as H varieties, whereas conversations, jokes, and other informal discourses are L varieties. To better illustrate the linguistic relationship between H- and L-domains in Han Chinese, I reference Fishman's taxonomy of language varieties and adapt it to the diglossic situation of the Chinese language (*Table 1*).

Table 1: *Distribution of H- and L-variety domains in modern China.*

H / L	Variety	Domain
H	Standard Mandarin	higher education journalism (international) media public events
L	Regional dialects	home school local street country areas businesses local media

In such a taxonomy, both varieties are genetically related to each other. The H variety, Mandarin, is categorized as written or formal-spoken usage. The L variety, regional dialects, marks Mandarin as the language of the more powerful section of the society and thus contributing to the Mandarin hegemony of the Chinese language (Schiffman).

To trek deeper into the influence of Mandarin hegemony on Chinese speakers of L varieties, I conducted ethnographic interviews over the phone with three Chinese speakers, two of whom are female.[1] The two female interviewees are originally from northeast China. The third interviewee is a male from Nanjing, a city located in southern China. All three have personally gone through domestic (internal) and international (external) migration that resulted in their language shift. On the facing page (*Transcript 1)* is a partial transcription of my interview with Song,[2] the male interviewee from Nanjing.[3]

[1] Most of the data for this paper were aggregated through interviews conducted mainly in Chinese, and were then transcribed in Chinese first and translated into English. To preserve the authenticity of our interactional exchanges in Chinese, the original Chinese data are presented first alongside my English translation in this paper.

[2] All names have been anonymized to protect the interviewees' privacy.

[3] I initiated this sociolinguistics research project with an interest in proving a widely

Transcript 1: *Excerpt from interview with Song.*

1	Song:	我老家是黄桥*的。小学才转到南京的。
		I grew up in my hometown, Huangqiao. I moved to Nanjing when I was in elementary school.
2	Intvr:	哦OK。那你会讲老家那边的方言么?
		Oh OK. Then do you know how to speak the dialect in your hometown?
3	Song:	会、会吧。我其实不总说都要忘了、只是和爷爷奶奶说话的时候才说。
		Yeah, probably. To be honest, I almost forget how to speak the dialect because I don't speak it very often, only when I talk to my grandparents.
4	Intvr:	那你都说什么{方言}啊? 你不说南京方言也不{总}说老家方言。
		Then what {dialect} do you speak usually? You don't speak Nanjing dialect, nor do you speak Huangqiao dialect [very often].
5	Song:	我基本上就说普通话。当时从小学起开始学的。
		I basically only speak Mandarin. Since I started learning Mandarin at elementary school.
6	Intvr:	{普通话}和老家的方言差别大么?
		Is {Mandarin} very different from your dialect?
7	Song:	嗯、挺大的。我记得当时学的特别费劲。最主要不学的话{我}也没法跟别人交流啊。同学当时还笑话我、但是现在都习惯{说普通话}了。[…]在我爸妈在南京工作一段时间之后也开始说普通话、在家我们也基本上不说老家的方言了。
		Yeah, very different. I remember it was very difficult to learn. What's most important is that {I} can't communicate with anybody if I don't know Mandarin. My classmates used to mock me, but now I'm used to {the language}. […] My parents also learned how to speak Mandarin after working in Nanjing for a while, we basically don't speak dialect at home anymore.

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reported trend that my generation of young Chinese students, especially female ones who pursue higher education in more developed urban areas or foreign countries, tend to abandon their native tongue, and thus conducted most interviews with female peers. However, as the interview process progressed, my data started to drift away from the original research question and revealed more interesting facts about Chinese linguistics landscape from the particular perspective of Chinese students overseas; that's when I decided to include another male speaker, Song, into the interview process.

In the interview, Song shared with me his experience of learning a more standard way of speaking and relegating his native tongue to a secondary linguistic resource. In line 7, he voices the personal struggles and limits on social communication caused by his dialect when he first moved to a more urbanized city, Nanjing ("can't communicate with anybody," "classmates used to mock me"). As evinced in his account, his regional dialect led to marginalization and even stigmatization as he entered a new speech community where Mandarin dominates the speech community. His physical migration therefore becomes an upward migration in the hierarchy of Chinese diglossia, indicating how regional speech communities are also stratified, similar to diglossia framework, given the different linguistic resources within these communities. The mockery from his classmates also informs us of the ideology of inferiority carried by L varieties under the Mandarin hegemony.

As I moved on with other interviewees, I came to realize the major difference between their narratives and Song's. While Song's language shift occurred as the result of internal migration (from a rural county to an urban city in Jiangsu province, China), others focused on their external migration experience, namely coming to the US for higher education, and how such an experience reshaped the way they wield their Chinese linguistic resources.

My second interviewee, Miao, was born and raised in Harbin, a city in northeast China. She is currently a freshman at a university in Virginia, and speaks Mandarin, Dongbei dialect (a Chinese variation spoken predominantly in Northeast China), and English. When she was in high school in Harbin, she used to juggle both Chinese varieties in different domains: she would speak perfect Mandarin when delivering a speech as a student representative in public, and code-switch back to her Dongbei dialect in front of her family and local friends. This compartmentalization in her Chinese language under different situations thus exemplifies and showcases her conscious knowledge of the previously-discussed distribution of Chinese varieties. However, after two months in the US, she has transformed from a polyglot who maneuvers up and down the language hierarchy to a

monoglot of the Dongbei dialect (*Transcript 2*).

Transcript 2: *Excerpt from interview with Miao.*

1	Intvr:	现在在国外还讲中文么?
		Do you still speak Chinese now that you're in the US?
2	Miao:	讲啊。干啥不讲啊？还成天说东北话呢!
		Sure. Why not? I also speak Dongbei dialect all the time!
3	Intvr:	真的么？跟中国学生么?
		Really? With Chinese students?
4	Miao:	啊呗。
		Yeah
5	Intvr:	那他们能听懂你说东北话么?
		Can they understand your dialect?
6	Miao:	…能吧、我管他们呢。他们好像还觉得挺逗的。
		… Probably, I don't care. They seem to find it funny somehow.
7	Intvr:	我感觉我都好久不说东北话了。因为在Pomona大家都说普通话
		I feel like I haven't spoken Dongbei dialect since forever. Because Chinese people here at Pomona all speak Mandarin.
8	Miao:	因为我想说啊。
		Because I want to.
9	Intvr:	啊?
		Huh?
10	Miao:	在这儿的中国女生儿开口就台湾腔！就…贼傻逼！贼嗲！还矫情！我可受不了、我怕被他们给我拐跑喽!
		Other Chinese girls here speak Chinese with a Taiwanese accent! It's… super stupid! Super *dia*! And pretentious! I can't stand it, I don't want their accent to influence mine!

Of note is her use of Dongbei phrases and words: 干啥, *gansha*, why/what, usually used when the speaker is annoyed or irritated; 成天, *chengtian*, all the time/all day long; 啊呗, *abei*, yes; 管, *guan*, care; 贼, *zei*, very[4]; and 傻逼, *shabi,* stupid, stupid people; rather offensive. Beyond particular word choices, her pronunciations of other words mark her as a native Dongbei speaker. She pronounces 还 as *hài*, not

4 This definition is unique to the Dongbei dialect. The word means thief in Mandarin.

hái as it is in Mandarin. The verb 觉得, to think, reckon, she pronounces *jiaode*, true to the Dongbei dialect, as opposed to *juéde*, as it would be in Mandarin. Lastly, her dialect shows through her use of the Dongbei-specific hedge-word 就, *jiu*, a mitigating word to lessen the impact of her utterance so as to render her speech felicitous in a discourse. She explains the motive behind her intentional language shift in line 8 and 10—her fear of adopting a Taiwanese accent as she interacts with "other Chinese girls" at her university. Additionally, in line 10, Miao expresses a strong aversion towards the Taiwanese accent with a noticeably more emphatic speech pattern (sentence-level emphasis as transcribed by exclamation marks). Here, her remarks echo the attributes Taiwanese Chinese indexes under the Mandarin hegemony. To further illustrate such indexicality, here are two examples culled from a widely used dictionary of Mandarin and an ethnographical research:

Example 1.
形容撒娇的声音或态度。 *Describes a voice or attitude of talking and acting likes a spoiled child or little girl.* "嗲" (dia). From the Dictionary of Standard Mandarin.
Example 2.
Almost half of them {participants of the research} describe Gang-Tai 2accent with an adjective "嗲" (dia). The adjective "嗲" was also associated with a sensation of soft, tender, girlish, sissy or cutesy by some of the respondents. Besides "嗲," more than one third of the participants have an impression that other modal particles, especially when drawn long and spoken in a soft tone, are frequently used in Gang-Tai accent, such as "啦" (la), "嘛" (ma), "耶" (ye), "囉" (luo). Lauren, & Yu-Tien. (2012). *Chinese Teenagers Perceptions of and Attitudes toward Taiwan Mandarin.* The University of Edinburgh.

Both examples on 嗲 ("spoiled child, sissy," Example 1) and Miao's word choices of 傻逼 ("stupid") and 矫情 ("pretentious") manifest the linguistic ideology under the hegemony, with which Chinese people form stereotypes about certain dialects and, by extension, their speakers. Due to an influx of Taiwanese pop culture—in the form of TV, music (featuring mostly maudlin ballads), and reality shows—Chinese people, especially teenagers, have begun to associate Taiwanese

Chinese speakers with the personalities of Taiwanese TV characters or singers and label them with ideologies in Example 2 (Yu-Tien 12). Miao never used the modal particles listed in Example 2, nor did she draw out her last syllables. Her linguistic performance of the Dongbei dialect stands in deliberate contrast to the Taiwanese accent in an attempt to construct her identity on a linguistically ideological level, one that steers clear of being labelled "stupid" or "pretentious."

Xin, a 21-year-old female from Harbin[5], voiced a similar intention to project a particular identity and differentiate herself from other Chinese students.

Transcript 3: *Excerpt from interview with Xin.*

1	Xin:	[⋯] 我在国外的时候特别爱说东北话！
		[…] I love speaking Dongbei dialect when I'm in the US!
2	Franco:	为什么？
		Why?
3	Xin:	因为⋯ 就⋯ 可能因为身边都是南方人吧{中国南方}。我得拿出来点东北女汉子的气势来！
		Because… *it's*… probably because I'm surrounded by southern [Chinese] people. I have to appear more *masculine as a Dongbei heroine*!

Xin shares the same language and education background as Miao, and here, demonstrates a similar linguistic performance of the Dongbei dialect—for instance, in her use of 就 as a hedge. She also articulates the reason for her language shift in line 3—to differentiate from her Southern Chinese schoolmates and to construct a "masculine," "Dongbei heroine" identity.

Example 3
哎呀妈呀，我还是女神？你可拉倒吧，我是一女汉子。
Oh my god, me, a goddess? You must be out of your mind. I am a female heroine. A female character in an 二人转 sketch titled《女神和女汉子》Goddess and Female Heroines. Chinese Spring Festival Gala 2015

[5] Harbin is a the provincial capital of Heilongjiang, a developing province in northeast China.

Example 3 is an excerpt from a 二人转, an *errenzhuan*, a form of sketch comedy with roots in Dongbei culture that is now a nationally popular comedy form. This particular sketch aired on national television. The nationwide broadcasting of *errenzhuan* reflects the popularization of Dongbei culture, and, specifically, the Dongbei dialect. Male characters in *errenzhuan* are usually self-sufficient farmers or unskilled laborers. Female characters, on the other hand, are mostly portrayed as hot-tempered housewives, yelling and cackling. Such performances, in general, invoke impressions—if not stereotypes—of Dongbei people, thereby indexing them and their language as "salt-of-the-earth," "humorous," and "crude." The term that Xin uses for "heroine" is 女汉子—a word which particularly signifies women who defy social expectations of femininity. It is now a widely-used neologism and can be directly linked to the use of the Dongbei dialect in the *errenzhuan* sketches airing on national television ("唉呀妈呀(oh my god)" and "拉倒(out of one's mind)"). Xin's choice to speak in the Dongbei dialect should therefore be interpreted as a performance in accordance with the social ideology that dictates the speech patterns of a "heroine."

In their decision to speak the Dongbei dialect, both Miao and Xin exhibit agency in their own experience of navigating through Chinese diglossia in the US. They recognized the social saliency of their linguistic resources—in the form of the current popularity of Dongbei culture, exemplified by the *errenzhuan*—and further realized the indexical potentials of these resources to construct their own unique style amongst Chinese students. Their reference to neologisms and deeply-rooted linguistic ideologies also highlights the dialogic work of language. Linguistic resources at our disposal live "socially charged [lives]" and often carry tastes of their past uses and users (Bakhtin). Miao and Xin's deployment of linguistic resources with imbued meanings is therefore a strategic move to ensure that their performances, as well as their self-claimed identities, are recognized by others in order to distinguish themselves from other Chinese students (Butler).

All three interviewees featured in this research paper are aware of their

Chinese diglossia as they negotiate and communicate their dominant identities in front of other Chinese speakers despite their different objectives. For Song, successful assimilation into the Mandarin-speaking student body is a strategic move to gain power from speaking an H-variety Chinese language. His narrative allows us to examine, on an individual level, the presence and effect of the Mandarin hegemony in China, which favors H-variety speakers and dialects of central/urban areas. Below are three other prime examples of this hegemony:

Example 4
字正腔圆 (zizheng qiangyuan). Standard pronunciation and smooth intonation. An idiom describing characteristics of Beijing dialect, also used to compliment one's standard Mandarin pronunciation. From the Dictionary of Standard Mandarin (Zhang, 2008).
Example 5
The use of the national common language and script shall be conductive to maintaining national sovereignty and dignity, be conductive to national integrity and unity, and be conductive to the construction of socialist material and spiritual civilization. [translation adapted from Rohsenow (2004, p. 41)] From Article 5 of the Law of the National Commonly Used Language (*Guojia Tongyong Yuyan Wenzi Fa*).
Example 6
说普通话,写规范字,做文明人,扬爱国情。Speak Mandarin; Write Standard Chinese; Be civilized/educated; Be patriotic. From the official slogan for "National Mandarin Promotion Week."

In example 4, the fact that such a characterization of Beijing dialect is now considered as a criterion of desirable Mandarin speech illustrates the hierarchical structure of Chinese linguistic hegemony. Among all Chinese speech communities, dialects of urban centers are more powerful, with the Beijing dialect being the most powerful, while those of rural and inland areas are often discriminated against (Dong 8). Under such a hegemony, Chinese language has increasingly become "amenable to redefinition as a measurable skill, as opposed to a talent, or an inalienable characteristic of group members" (Tan 345). The

nationalistic implication of said hegemony is also seen in example 5 and 6, which connect linguistic competence in Mandarin to one's "national integrity" and "spiritual civilization."

For Miao and Xin, their choice to speak a certain dialect seems to be driven only by their desire to differentiate themselves from other Chinese speakers and to achieve new dominant identities, such as the "heroine." In their narratives, the Chinese linguistic hegemony is apparent in their recounting of linguistic ideologies borne by different Chinese varieties—for example, the perception of the Taiwanese accent as "stupid." However, their migration away from China, the focus of where such hegemony operates, to the US, where no overarching Chinese language policies exist, led them to orient towards the hegemony differently and deploy linguistic resources that would have otherwise been avoided. When immersed in an expatriated Chinese speech community, where English is used in most daily communication, Chinese comes to mean different things to its speakers as it becomes less associated with national identity or degree of civilization and more of a shorthand for interaction with other Chinese speakers. In this vein, their diglossia becomes a resource with which they perform a range of identities at their discretion, and the Dongbei dialect they know by heart starts to take on a stylistic potential that is no longer reduced to an L-variety, suppressed by national language policy.

Notes:

Transcription Conventions.

。	clause final (for Chinese Transcription)
.	clause final (for English Transcription)
、	short pause (for Chinese Transcription)
,	short pause (for English Transcription)
!	sentence-level emphasis
?	tag question or question intonation
…	long pause
[	beginning of overlap
]	end of overlap
{…}	researcher's comment
[…]	researcher's omission
@	laughter

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