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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

the combination of such scaled resources leads to their emergence as a globally recognizable middle class. Before reporting on the empirical part of the research, we shall offer a brief sketch of the mass internal migration and stratification of the Chinese society to prepare the reader for a fuller engagement of the paper.

Mass internal migration and the emergence of Chinese middle class

Mass internal migration in China started in the 1980s. The migrant population reached 230 million by 2011, some 17 per cent of the country's total population. This figure refers to labor migrants; and it is expected to be much higher if we include elite migrants – people who move to urban centers such as Beijing and Shanghai, and move upward to the middle layers of the host societies. Social classification has been a curious notion in China, at least for the past decades. In contrast to the West where the notion of class has a history of perception and continuous contention (Beeghley, 1996; Dahrendorf, 1959; Gerth and Mill, 1946; Holmwood, 1996; Kerbo, 2000; Marger, 2005; Sobel, 1981; Wallerstein, 1983, 2000, 2001; Wright, 1978, 1997; Wright and Martin, 1987; Wright and Perrone, 1977), modern social class has more recently returned to public perception and discourse, after a long period of denial and erasure in the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist tradition (Dong, 2011). The class structure between 1949 and 1979 was defined as a peasant class segment and an industrial worker's class segment, with the latter segment including intellectuals and the Communist Party cadres. Both class segments belonged to the proletariat, and the means of production were turned into state property (Li, 2011; Lu, 2002).

The economic reform of the 1980s, however, confronted this class categorization with various challenges. We have witnessed reshuffles of classes and class fractions: the rapidly polarized distribution of power and social wealth has given birth to social groups such as the 'new rich' (baofahu 暴发户) and the 'privileged' (tequan jieceng 特权阶层), and has led to the downscaling of industrial worker's class. As for the emerging middle class, debates are centered on the question of how to define it (Ferreira, 2013; Mizrachi, 2013; Matusov & Smith, 2012). A remarkable similarity shared by all interviewees of the present study is their denial of middle class status. 'I am not rich enough' and 'there is no middle class in China' are among the frequent answers (this may echo the 'middle-class anxiety' or 'psychic insecurity' observed elsewhere; Fussell, 1984; Matusov & Smith, 2012; Mills, 1951; Wright, 1985). They have encountered difficulties in defining themselves, partly because as a social group they only recently emerged after decades of relative pauperization of Chinese society under the centralized economy. While we do not intend to conclusively define the Chinese middle class, it is safe to say that there is a group of people, and perhaps a very large group, who socio-economically fall between the worker's class and the (relatively small but powerful) 'upper class' of ultra-rich in contemporary Chinese society.

Given the peculiar historical development of China's social classes – the lack of continuity and hence the lack of reference – it can be problematic to identify them using 'hard' criteria such as income, occupation, education, and social origin. For instance, the features displayed by the informants in the present study (wedding practices, owning apartments in city centers, regular trips to Europe, valuing small but expensive hotels), may sound 'upper class' in terms of wealth; but wealth is not an accurate indicator of social class, especially in China where the society is undergoing a remarkable transformation. Consequently 'soft' criteria, including semiotic resources, mobility, taste, offer alternative perspectives on social classification. Taste, as Bourdieu (1984) coined it, is an acquired disposition towards cultural goods and practices, both reflective and formative of social class positions. The formulation and articulation of individual taste is realized through a scheme of habitus – the socialized body – that is progressively inscribed with social structure in the course of individual and collective history. Taste is the systematic expression of habitus, and through the life-style related sub-spaces such as furniture, clothing, language, food, and body hexis, people tend to display fairly consistent dispositions and practices which point to their social classification. Consequently, through such 'soft' diacritics, we can witness the 'making' of an emerging social class in Thompson's sense, that is, through shared experiences, shared reactions towards that experience, and shared practices acting upon those experiences (Thompson, 1978).

In the next section, we will show how the elite migrants acquire taste-related, identity making discourses through their access to informal learning environments at a global scale; and how these discourses are intertwined with resources they acquired from advanced education at a nation-state scale.

The offline online ethnographic fields

"Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6). In other words, taste groups people and defines relations between groups by complexes of recognizable features such as behavior, comportment, speech, and consumption pattern. The informants of the present study – a group of Chinese Saab owners – were initially drawn to each other by their tastes in automobiles. It was known that people around the world made emotion-guided decisions in purchasing cars, but the Chinese Saab owners we investigated showed unusually strong affections to their cars and eagerly denied the idea of holding their car brand as an index of social status. The Saab owners created a blogging page in a popular Chinese online car forum (x-car.com) for Saab cars in 2004, and they got to know each other through online interactions. They are clustered in the major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, and they connected to each other virtually where spatial distance made little difference. Their online activities included uploading texts, videos, photos, announcing Saab-related activities, commenting on each other's blog messages, and thus communicating with each other occurred at a low intensity level. The

content of their blogs were mostly exchanges of technical information on Saab cars, sharing of driving experiences, and of their passion for Saab cars. On average, around 100 bloggers were active on the Saab forum.

Some Saab bloggers (about 20) started meeting each other ‘offline’ around 2009 when they discovered more similarities between each other than their shared preference for a car brand (hereafter the ‘Saab circle/group’). For instance, they shared hobbies such as playing golf, they traveled abroad frequently, many male members smoked cigars, and some had a handsome collection of wines. Demographically, they aged between 37 and 49, originated from small towns and cities, and mostly were employed in the financial sectors of urban centers. A majority of them earned foreign academic diplomas after extended periods of time living in another country such as US, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Most of them owned apartments in the prime locations of the cities where they lived. They thus formed a ‘community of practice’ in that identities and membership belongings took shape through activities, participation, social practices, and the use of shared linguistic repertoire (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Another factor that led the participants to form a smaller circle was that Saab car dealers lowered their prices in the Chinese market in 2009, and as a result, Saab cars became more affordable to those who were ‘not exactly the same type of people’. Interestingly, it seemed that when Saab became more democratically accessible, the group – the earlier generation of Saab fans – created exclusivity by adding more taste-related group features such as international traveling, golf, cigar, wine, etc. More features, in other words, became part of the identity ‘register’. It was no longer enough just to be a Saab car owner, driver, and fan; one now needed to acquire, to show and to perform all the unregistered features of distinction in an ordered way to create identity.

The offline activities of the circle ranged from long distance car trips to tourist spots, wedding motor parades, to tea/wine/cigar tasting and meals. The most recent activity that gathered a sizable group of the Saab friends was a wedding ceremony in Shanghai. The bride was a member of the Saab circle (but the groom was an ‘outsider’ who did not drive a Saab car); she wanted all the wedding cars to be Saab and invited her Saab friends to help with the motor parade. The Saab friends traveled from Beijing, Shenzhen, and other cities to Shanghai and made up a 20 car team. We had been following the Saab circle online for more than a year, and the Shanghai wedding was the first occasion that the ethnographer (Dong) could meet the group in person (apart from one Saab member, XL, who had been a long-time friend).

The wedding took place in November 2011. The motor parade started in the early afternoon, picked up the newlyweds and their guests from various locations, and headed to the ceremony. The wedding ceremony was held at a golf resort in suburban Shanghai, where the 200 plus guests could stay overnight after the ceremony and reception. All hotel rooms of the guests were paid by the newlyweds (Ms. C and Mr. L). Such a wedding might appear unnecessarily expensive to many; but for the newlywed couple, it perhaps was, in the Bourdieuan fashion, a successful investment in social capital and in networking with foreseeable materialization (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 375).

The research is ethnographic in nature. The ethnographer (Dong) and a key informant (XL) were long term friends; XL’s passion for Saab and the informal learning environments he displayed were curious to us as an indicator of middle class features in China. XL first demonstrated his passion, knowledge, and taste in late 2009; he directed us to the digital spaces shared by the Saab group in mid 2010. We conducted a year-long online ethnography around the Saab group (cf. Androutsopoulos, 2006; Leppänen, Pitkaanen–Huhta, Piirainen–Marsh, Nikula, & Peuronen, 2009; Varis, 2014; Wilson, 2006; see also Dong forthcoming for virtual ethnography and online/offline research). The wedding was a turning point at which the online ethnography was combined with offline interactions with most group members. Dong gained access, with XL’s help, to the wedding as a researcher, and was able to observe the event, to participate in networking activities, to take photos, to collect documents such as leaflets, and to interview guests. Therefore the ethnography can be divided into three stages: online ethnography before the wedding (Example 1), offline ethnography during the wedding (Example 2), and online-offline combined ethnography after the wedding (Example 3). Throughout these three stages, XL served as an important information source both offline and online. In the offline part of ethnography, we managed to interview five participants at length (about two hours each) during the wedding, plus a number of other individuals and groups in shorter interviews (ranging between 10 and 30 min). Interviews were conducted in an informal conversation-like manner, and the topics were organized around their life stories and their perceptions of life-style, hobbies, social class, and language varieties such as Putonghua, English, Shanghai local dialects, and their home dialects (e.g. the Northeast dialects, the Henan dialects). The interviews were carried out in Putonghua right before, during, or immediately after the wedding ceremony. In the online part of ethnography, we collected documents (Example 1), conducted participant as well as non-participant observation (forum.xcar.com), and interacted with them on the social networking services such as Weibo (a Chinese equivalent of Facebook, discussed in Example 3) which enabled the members to be in constant contact with each other for low intensity small talk. In both online and offline parts of the research, all participants gave their consents for participating the research. All informants involved in the present research happened to be male, because the Saab group is overwhelmingly male (the bride is the only female Saab member to our knowledge). Dong translated the transcripts into English. Other data types included observed episodes recorded in ethnographic field notes, online digital data produced by and on this group, and documents collected during and after the wedding.

Informal learning, scaled mobility, and the making of middle class identity

The three examples we will present are the Saab members’ discourses on a complex of lifestyle choices, ranging from virtual engagement in popular culture (Example 1), physical and spatial movements across the globe (Example 2), to taste discourse on French wine (Example 3). The empirical section is a combination of different data sets – photo/video from the



Fig. 1. 2007 Saab print advertisement: Release Me.

online ethnography before the wedding (Example 1), face-to-face interviews right during the wedding (Example 2), and virtual interactions triggered by a blog exchange after the wedding (Example 3).

Example 1: virtual mobility and the shared persona of the group

Fig. 1 is a print Saab advertisement published in 2007. In the advertisement, a silver-colored Saab 9-3 car is in motion, shining its front lights, running through water, and stirring up a blue wave. The slogan 'Release Me' is accompanied by its Chinese translation 释放无可抵挡 (in pinyin2: shifang wuke didang) which means literally 'set (me) free, nothing can stop (me).' The English slogan also is the title of a 40-s Saab commercial Music Video (MV) released in the same year. Along with the music, the MV shows a butterfly bumping against a closed window, a dolphin jumping in the ocean, a German shepherd escaping from a chain. It ends with the theme 'Power of nature wants to be free'. Both the print advertisement and the MV were shown to me in an interview with a Saab friend right before the wedding. He showed these cultural products (photo and video) in an attempt to explain the shared characteristics 'mensao' (闷骚) of the Saab group.

In this example, the MV never made it into Chinese mainstream traditional media, but is circulated on the Internet. Neither English nor Chinese subtitle is provided. This limited accessibility, however, does not adversely affect its popularity among Chinese Saab fans. English is not an obstacle, as its fans are mostly English literate, and they nevertheless enjoy the music and manage to comprehend its meaning through the pictures. Being strictly confined to the Internet is not an obstacle either; it testifies to the influence of the Internet in today's China, particularly among urban young people. Most of the Saab members indicate in their interviews that the Internet serves as their main source of information. They spend much of their days on the Internet for work, for checking news, for networking, and for entertainment. This phenomenon is not distinctive of the Saab members. Chinese urban youth, much in the same way as their counterparts across the world who can afford a computer and are Internet literate, also use the Internet to access the globally circulated popular culture products, to follow their favored performance, and to acquire 'proper' discourse in the online informal environments. Here English and the Internet are two important learning resources that offer the user access to global circulated information.

The Internet offers relatively freer environments so that people may feel that they have options in learning beyond their immediate surroundings. The freedom of choice is perhaps the most appealing element in informal learning, as learners are motivated when they are not forced into learning but are taking charge of learning objectives, learning processes, and evaluation of learning outcomes. The Saab fans, when they attempt to learn more about the car brand, turn to the Internet and search for relevant information. The print advertisement of 'Release Me' and the MV which shows the escape of a butterfly, dolphin, and German shepherd, all point to and echo the participants' passion and their longing for freedom. It projects these indexical meanings to the car and offers an identity formula which the informants can follow. This meaning making 'shoots' through various layers from global to local circulation. But 'freedom of choice' is never absolute, and increasing empirical evidence shows that selective exposure is remarkable among Internet users across the globe, in seeking out information, sharing their own passions, and in establishing online communities (Leibold, 2011; Zuckerman, 2008).

This example is an instance of what Appadurai (1996) calls mediascapes, "large and complex repertoires" of images and narratives across the globe to create local narratives. The Saab members, however, are not merely at the receiving end of the messages. We see agency in the participants' active engagement in the meaning making process. They retrieved the advertisement and the video from outside China, uploaded and shared them with other Saab owners; many Saab owners viewed, downloaded, and reinvented meanings of the image and the video. The Saab informants showed this MV to me in order to explain what they meant by 'mensao' (闷骚) when they used the word to describe the Saab friends (Dong, 2013). 'Mensao' is a recently coined Internet term in the Chinese language, an adjective describing people, both male and female, who appear to be calm and inconspicuous but deep down inside they are extremely passionate, longing for freedom, and are ready to 'explode' into performance. This kind of 'cool' is highly valued among the group members, and the Saab friends

frequently use it to imply that they are different from the ‘new rich’ (baofahu 暴发户, who are wealthy but without a taste) and the ‘privileged’ (tequan jieceng 特权阶层, who are powerful by abusing their power). Here “cool” is used as a meaning category, or a key of communication that can refer to commodities, people, language, appearances, events; it is an indexical category with considerable “emic” value in a very large range of communities (Blommaert, 2016). The Saab friends use the MV as a ‘footnote’ to the jargon term and see it as an accurate description of their shared persona. The kind of cool that ‘Mensao’ projects is embedded in their lives: how they look, how they hold themselves, how they move, how they speak, and all these cannot be learnt from school education (cf. Dong, 2012 for the connections between the group persona and the social class and social practices/tastes).

The emphasis on the informal learning environments does not mean that the formal school learning becomes unimportant. On the contrary, much of our learning still is institutionally organized and monitored at a national scale, and learners’ performances are assessed by exams or other means of evaluation so that they may earn formal qualifications. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) provide important arguments on the role of formal education in acquiring the hard diacritics of social class; and Chinese scholars have documented the highly competitive school system and its influence on one’s social mobility (Zhang, 2013; Zhang & Kailin, 1998; Zheng, 2007). In actual social practices at a ground level, however, the connection between one’s educational credentials and his or her social class identity cannot be easily taken for granted. Formal learning and educational credential are the first step, as shown in the example that the informants have acquired a reasonable level of English proficiency and have become computer literate through formal schooling; without both they would not have had a chance to access the informal learning environments. But they need more to establish a middle class identity. We observe that the formal learning scale increasingly has to negotiate ‘territories’ with informal learning scale, and the popularization of the Internet offers various ways to young people.

In short, they not only buy a Saab car. They develop their identities in relation to the car they buy. That is to say, they convert a consumption act (buying a car) into a consumer identity act (something that can reveal ‘who I am’). The modeling of their shared characteristics on the perceived meaning of the car explains their choice of the car as well as their ‘choice’ of each other as members of a group. This echoes what Marcuse (1964) pointed out as a “one-dimensional man” a long time ago, that the European and US middle classes organize their identities with reference to consumption patterns. The emerging Chinese new middle class have quickly, with the speed of the Internet, learnt the indexical meanings of the cultural products they consume, and claim membership of a global community of middle class.

Example 2: spatial mobility and the scaled learning resources for a global membership

While Example 1 involves cultural products which are available online and were shown to Dong before the wedding, Example 2 is drawn from conversations during the wedding fieldwork. The wedding was a rare occasion in that we could meet the group whom we had followed online for more than 10 months. Dong immersed herself in the wedding, observing the event intensively, talking to as many people as she could, and targeting possible interviewees for in-depth conversations. The next morning, the bride Ms. C and the groom Mr. L joined their Saab group guests, Mr. P, XL, and Dong (DJ), over breakfast. The couple were making plans for their honeymoon; Mr. P was Vice President (VP) of a transcontinental logistics company and he travelled extensively. Therefore the couple took the opportunity to learn about traveling from Mr. P and the breakfast became an informal learning field. Observably, global traveling for leisure was one of the most frequent topics among the Saab members. The conversation was mostly in Chinese with occasional shifts to English. It was audio recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by Dong. We include the original transcript and its English translation.

Original transcript and translation:

Original	Translation
1 P : {低声、慢速、悠闲}你们度蜜月 嘛，你去那个，呃，希腊的米克诺斯 嘛	1 P: {low voice, slow, casual} You plan your honeymoon, (you can) go to Greek Mykonos ³
2 L: {突然、快速、大声、和P的声音形 成显明对比}好！= 希腊！	2 L: {sudden, loud, quick, in a sharp contrast to P's voice} Great! = Greece!
3 C : =可以啊！那（这个时候冷吗？	3 C: = Possible! Is it cold there (at this time of the year)?
4 : 不冷，地中海还冷，挺安全的..... 有些酒店大概不超过20个房间.....	4 P: Not cold, Mediterranean, very warm there, pretty safe... some hotels have less than 20 rooms...
5 : 那还可以	5 C: That sounds good...
6 : 很漂亮	6 P: Very beautiful.
7 : {突然、高声、欢快的声音}有困 难，找P，哈哈哈.....	7 C: {sudden, high pitch, jolly voice} (if anyone) have any problem, find P (to help out), hahaha...
8 P: {声音中带着笑意}五一我刚去过	8 P: {smiling voice} I just was there in May Day holiday
9 C : 是吗？	9 C: All right?
10 XL : 是那个风车那个岛吗？	10 XL: Is it the island with windmills?
11 : 哎，对，对，还有一个是圣托里 尼，也可以，但是米克诺斯是看日落	11 P: Hmm, yeah, and another one is Santorini, (which is) also nice, but Mykonos is famous for its sunset
12 C : {轻快地}好啊	12 C: {soft} Great
13 P: 那边有一个...=	13 P: There is...=
14 C: =	14 C: = I have to go and buy a camera first
15 那得买一个相机啊	15 XL: Talk to Feixiang! He has many cameras and lenses
15 XL : 找“飞翔”啊！飞翔（有）那么完	16 P: Well... 17 C: Mine is a Sony digital {switch to English} camera
	18 P: The place is so beautiful and you don't really {V041_travelabroad}

The conversation is centered on mobility and shows the couple's learning of transcontinental traveling from Mr. P who draws on his own global experiences. The interlocutors involved are all well educated professionals; Ms. C and Mr. L both work in the financial industry in Shanghai. C is in her mid thirties and L is in his mid forties, and both originally are from the nearby regions. Formal credentials acquired at the scale of national education provide them with important resources that enable them to enter and establish themselves in the intensive competition of urban labor markets and urban social spaces. In other words, without their accomplishments in formal schooling, they would not have a chance to be part of the Saab group and to acquire the taste-related identity making discourses.

At their wedding ceremony, an entire wall was covered by a giant world map, with many cities and tourist places marked across the world: those places constituted sites they planned to visit together the rest of their lives. At the time of the wedding, they had been considering going to Europe for their honeymoon (without a long preparation and booking period), and in the conversation that follows, they are seen tapping P's travel knowledge. P speaks softly and slowly (turn 1), chatting while having his breakfast peacefully (being peaceful is a marker of *mensao*). His style of speech signals that he is casual and relaxed, giving sincere advice rather than showing off his global experiences. L responds quickly in a high pitch (turn 2), showing his endorsement of and excitement over the suggestion. His voice however comes unusually quick and sharp and that leaves people with an idea of being sudden and unnatural. It seems that traveling abroad for fun is not a familiar concept for him; the data suggest that he feels uneasy entering a new discursive space and is struggling to be an equally competent interlocutor in that space (cf. Blommaert, 2005 on sociolinguistic space). Here, and in the rest of the conversation, we witness a learning process in which the learners invest effort in acquiring information and knowledge about, as well as rules and norms of talking an unfamiliar topic. It constitutes informal learning in the sense it occurs out of a formal school setting and takes place during a social interaction among friends; there is no teacher who can evaluate learning results. However, the participants establish tacit rules and norms, and a violation of these rules will be silently 'policed' by the audience (Leppänen, 2012). To avoid being 'policed', L sounds careful, abrupt, and unnatural in his speech.

P gives very specific information about the Greek Islands, such as the number of rooms of a particular hotel, the subtle differences between the islands, and the specific scenery for which each island is famous (turns 4–11). He recommends a small but prestige hotel which is exclusively known to a small population of tourists who presumably have 'real' taste. At the scale of physical movement, P acquires the knowledge from his highly mobile and expensive lifestyle, and the indexical value of such a lifestyle is enacted quietly but accurately. The low key style of the recommended hotel caters to the 'Mensao' characteristic of the Saab friends illustrated in Example 1; both examples demonstrate the exclusivity they prefer and is in accordance with their taste of car, taste of hotel, and taste of people with whom they want to keep company.

P advises C not to carry expensive camera and lenses (like those "ordinary" tourists), because Chinese tourists, especially group tourists who speak little English, are reported to be targets of organized crime in Europe. P's warning has two layers of meanings. At the first layer, P uses 'We Chinese' to refer to all Chinese tourists in the West, and this indexes a collective Chinese identity. The inclusivity claims a democratic disposition and dilutes the elitism in P's speech, elitism typified with the expensive and exclusive tastes in tourism destination and prestigious hotel. At a different layer, however, P seems to distinguish him and his friends from those who travel in tourist groups, those who perhaps are loaded with cash and without much education (the new rich *baofahu*); he and people of his kind, in contrast, carry credit cards instead of cash, have expensive cameras but do not show off, speak English (which indexes a good education background) so that they find their own way around, and travel freely rather than depend on a scheduled tourist group. In other words, they travel in style, and they live in more similar lifestyles of their Western middle class peers than that of most 'ordinary' Chinese people (cf. Jaworski & Thurlow, 2009; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011 for stylization and elitism).

In this example, we see Appadurai's (1996) ethnoscares in a tourism context. Remarkably two scales of learning are at play, and the learning entails access to scaled learning resources and enacts scaled class membership. At the scale of national formal learning, the interlocutors all have acquired necessary linguistic resources and educational credentials which 'purchase' them a place in the city; at the scale of informal learning, the informants accumulate a specific set of 'features of distinction', for instance global mobility, in informal social encounters. What we also observe in the example is that they run into a nonfinite aspect of attributes of 'eliteness', the point being that no matter how 'elite' one may be, it is always possible to construct another level of privilege that one can only aspire to (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2009).

Example 3: taste and the enregisterment of middle class identity

During the wedding, we observed the group closely and selected five informants to focus on in the follow-up online research. The after-wedding Internet fieldwork involves observing the members' activities on the motor blog forum (*x-car.com*), Weibo (*weibo.com*, the Chinese equivalence of Twitter), Renren (*renren.com*, the Chinese equivalence of Facebook), commenting on their updates, and communicating with them by e-mail, Weibao, Weixin (a Chinese networking software similar to Line), and other distance communicative means. Compared to the motor blog forum (*x-car.com*) in Example 1, Weibo is more personalized, allowing users to maintain their own spaces in which they can share information about their status, broadcast activities, and express opinions either publicly or within a social network. Weibo connects well-known public figures (celebrities, public intellectuals, politicians) to millions of their "friends", and magnifies their voices given the sheer number of people they may reach instantly. Moreover, non-celebrity Weibo users have discovered the power of Weibo in specific social circles and have learned to maintain constant contact through low intensity casual talk. Example 3 is an instance of after-wedding online fieldwork data. The informant of this example, PY, is a senior manager working in

an investment bank in Shanghai. We met him during the Shanghai wedding, observed him when we both were engaged in conversations with other guests, and interviewed him for two hours. We subsequently followed him on Weibo and we frequently chatted on Weibo. PY is in his early forties. He was born and spent his youth in Dalian, a coastal city in Northeastern China, obtained a Bachelor's degree in Shanghai, went to the UK for postgraduate studies, and returned to Shanghai some ten years ago. His leisure activities include reading books, listening to music, playing golf; he likes Cuban cigar and French wine. He is married and has two children.

Transcript and translation of the chatting entries:

Chatting entries	Translation
<p>1 图片上面配的文字： 不懂酒。 Georges Dubceuf</p> <p>2 有酒的照片</p> <p>3 PY和DJ的weibo聊天记录</p> <p>(1) DJ：有朋友要我帮他从欧洲带红酒。我不懂酒，所以想请教 {笑脸}</p> <p>(2) 我也不太懂，不過好壞能喝個大概。有個app叫wine-searcher，下載看下，價格可以做個參考。</p> <p>(3)好，谢啦，去找下app。怎样尝出好坏呢？你这款Georges Duboeuf怎么样呢？</p> <p>(4)嚐多了就知道好壞了 😊，這個基本屬於經驗主義了</p> <p>.....</p>	<p>1 Accompanying comment above the picture: (I) don't really know (much about) wine. Georges Dubceuf'</p> <p>2 A picture of the wine</p> <p>3 The chatting entries between PY and the researcher (DJ)</p> <p>(1) DJ: Friends want me to buy wine from Europe for them. I don't know much about it, (and) so I want to learn (from you). {smily face}</p> <p>(2) PY: I don't know much about wine either, but I can tell by tasting, whether it is good or bad, there is an App called wine-searcher, download it and try it, take the prices it gives as a reference.</p> <p>(3) DJ: OK thanks! I am searching for the App. But how do you taste and tell (if a wine is) good or bad? How is your Georges Duboeuf?</p> <p>(4) PY: You would know if you try much enough {a yellow smily}, reply on your experience</p> <p>.....</p>



Fig. 2. Georges 'Dubceuf'.

This example is about taste, surrounding PY post on his Weibo page about the wine he sampled. The photo he posted in turn triggered an online chat between him and Dong (Fig. 2). Some consider Weibo an important channel for voicing their opinions, whereas others keep it as a tool of communication. Nonetheless, Weibo (along with other online networking tools) has an impact on people's communicative patterns. PY had posted a picture of a bottle of wine, Georges Dubceuf, on his Weibo page. The wine was placed on a dining table; other items on the table included a glass half filled with wine, a bowl, a black wallet, a box of cigars, and an ignitor. The accompanying comment above the picture read '(I) don't really know (much about) wine. Georges Dubceuf' (in Chinese '不懂酒 Georges Dubceuf'). Note that 'Dubceuf' is a typo of 'Dubceuf' (this will be discussed later). It is perhaps useful to know that 1995 was a good year for Georges Dubceuf wine.

In the accompanying comment above the photo, PY does not say whether the wine tastes good or bad, but merely states the label of the wine and says that he is not a wine expert. Wine culture is exotic to most Chinese people, partly because of the dazzling wine styles, geographic regions, grape varieties, producing methods, 'terroir', year of vintage, quantity of production, etc. The unfamiliar French pronunciation as well as spelling further complicate the matter. This explains the typo in PY's accompanying comments above the picture, and he does not seem to notice the typo when we respond with its usual spelling 'Dubceuf' in turn 3. At the communicative level on which the interaction occurs, the typo does not impede meaning establishment between PY and his friends. The photo, the French label, and the wine, are symbols that index cultural taste and expensive lifestyle. These indexical meanings are accurately enacted to and received by his Weibo friends.

When it comes to taste, however, small details reveal big identity meanings; details 'betray' what people claim to be and what they really are. As an agricultural comestible which has been enregistered as an aesthetic form (cf. Agha, 2003;

Dong, 2009 for enregisterment as a process), wine is subject to descriptive and evaluative discourses from the very early stage of setting price, advertising, being (re)sold at auction, to its circulation and consumption (Silverstein, 2006). Wine is presented and represented in discursive constructions, and the learning of French wine culture involves acquiring and articulating precise discourses (including spelling) on and around the agricultural comestible. The misspelling of the wine label is seemingly minute, at least to his Chinese Weibo friends; yet to a sophisticated outsider who has more accrued (Western) cultural capital, this misspelling might signal try-hard naivety. It may question the middle class identity of the informant's on a global scale.

In the transcript of the Weibo chatting entries, we ask for his opinions of the wine, and he repeats that he knows little about wine, but is able to tell good wine from bad wine by tasting (turn 2). PY is very careful in using the wine as an identity symbol, and meanwhile, this is another instance of 'mensao' – the 'cool' and low key way of showing an exclusive taste. He advises the ethnographer to use an online tool 'wine-searcher' to learn about wine. It is an Internet application that can be downloaded and installed onto a smartphone. The 'wine-searcher' is highly user friendly, providing detailed information about almost any wine one wants to check. People can search for and learn about many descriptive and evaluative discourses about the wine, trace the history of the wine, and compare the wine to similar wines. If one has the 'app' on their phone, he or she is able to check the price and makes a decision while at a wine store. Here we see that modern communicative technology such as the Internet and smartphone has not only changed people's communicative patterns, but also their learning patterns and consumption patterns. We see what Appadurai calls technoscapes, the flow of technologies exercising influences on local lives.

In this example, PY attempts to show a middle class taste and to model his identity on the globally circulated elite identity script composed of lifestyle markers such as French wine. The enregisterment of an urban middle class identity is a lifelong learning process: the elite migrants we investigated succeeded in the severe competition of national education, managed to secure a decent job in metropolis such as Shanghai, bought expensive apartments in prime locations, and drove Saab cars. However, all these accomplishments at a nation-state level of formal education have to compete and negotiate with informal learning when the informants attempt to claim a global middle class identity.

Conclusion

We have argued that informal learning environments increasingly influence people's patterns of communication and their ways of organizing lives. Through the Internet, smartphones and other informal learning environments, cultural codes penetrate from the global 'scapes', through various layers, all the way to the local circulation and perception. Our informants – the Saab members – achieved upward social mobility and modeled their identities on globally available templates for behavior, discourse, and taste. This echoes the findings from Shin (2012) on middle class Korean immigrants in Toronto and Vandrick's (2011) study of new global elites. In our investigation of the Saab members' mobility and social identity, we observed a combination of scaled learning resources: access to informal (global) learning environment and access to (nation-state) advanced education. The elite migrants succeed in the highly competitive formal education system and manage to settle in Shanghai; their spatial as well as upward social mobility involves the credentials they earn from formal learning environments. In other words and in line with Bourdieu and Passeron's argument (1977), formal education usually provides them with the 'hard' diacritics of social class. However, the hard diacritics of class need to be – and will be, according to Bourdieu (1984) – reflected in an ordered range of 'soft' diacritics by means of which people create and maintain class boundaries between themselves and others, by means of practices of 'distinction', and so contribute to their collective 'making' of a social class (in the sense of Thompson, 1978). The informal learning environments therefore offer the elite migrants possibilities to acquire these 'soft' diacritics and class-making practices: tastes in French wine, virtual as well as spatial mobility, prestige cars, etc.; and the combination of such scaled resources is what explains their emergence as a globally recognizable middle class. Two scales of learning appear to be at play in the emergence of the informants as globally recognizable middle class: a national formal learning scale, and a global informal learning scale, both of which are 'collapsed' into a local scale of performance and negotiation.

Significantly, what sets this group apart is mobility across different scale-levels. They are spatially mobile at national and global scales, and they are virtually mobile so that they do their shopping online and play computer games with partners across the globe. In globalization, class making is strongly connected to the mobility potential that one can realistically claim. The 'soft' capital offering such forms of mobility is lodged in specific semiotic repertoires, and thus in the capacity of these people to make themselves understood in various places, in different social environments and across different scale-levels.

Their access to informal learning and their mobility potential is still quite an exclusive commodity in contemporary China. The rapid expansion of the class of well-paid young urban professionals should not obscure the fact that most Chinese are not in a position now to entertain realistic plans of international mobility. A mobile group of people – people for whom mobility is a possible choice rather than a necessity – is something that reshuffles the social hierarchies of contemporary China. It restratifies China both by means of new forms of distribution of 'hard' resources – income, economic power – and 'soft' resources such as discourses of the self and of the way the world is. Sociolinguistic attention to such 'soft' resources and their patterns of distribution is therefore, not very surprisingly, a rather sensitive tool for understanding the rapid social changes and the increasing social and cultural diversification of China.

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Notes.

- (1) China National Health and Family Planning Committee “2012 Report on China’s Internal Migrant Population” (《国家人口计生委《中国流动人口发展报告2012》》) <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2012/08-09/4094030.shtml>
- (2) Pinyin is the Roman alphabet realization of Mandarin coined in the 1950s.
- (3) Transcription keys:
 - {description of speaker’s manner, voice, style, facial expression, etc.}
 - (part of the utterance is omitted; added by the author to improve understanding)
 - Emphasis
 - = = Overlapping utterances
- (4) 4.8% of the Chinese population succeed in winning a seat in higher education; compared to US 24%, Japan 24%, South Korea 25%. http://www.cssn.cn/gj/gj_gwshkx/gj_zhyj/201310/t20131026_590150.shtml

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