Mobility, voice, and symbolic restratification: An ethnography of 'elite migrants' in urban China[1]

By Jie DONG
Tilburg University

Abstract
In this paper I explore class (re)stratification of the contemporary Chinese society through the use of various semiotic resources by a group of 'elite migrants' who are highly mobile within the country as well as globally. I identify two sets of semiotic resources and argue that they are different forms of voice articulating the different angles and directions of class distinction. The first set of resources are external criteria of group membership, expressed by their control of languages – Putonghua and English – that are not tied to one place but offer the mobility that characterizes their social class. The second set of resources are internal criteria of membership ('mensao') connected to and predicated on knowledge of particular consumption commodities. The fieldwork data demonstrate a multidimensional complex of voice, internal as well as external and with several scales being oriented towards. Through these resources the elite migrants create an identifiable 'middle class' voice in contemporary China.

1. Introduction

Social class is a highly contested notion in contemporary Chinese society because of its historical development; yet one observes the progressive formation of new social groups and hears articulation of class consciousness in everyday social practices (Lu 2002; Li 2007a, 2007b). A case in point here is that after 30 years of accelerated economic growth, a sizable new 'middle class' is emerging as a social layer in China, often consisting of people who have relocated to the country's urban centers such as Beijing and Shanghai with higher academic or professional qualifications. Given the peculiar historical development of China's social classes, it can be problematic to identify them using 'hard' criteria such as income, occupation, education, and social origin. Consequently 'soft' criteria, e.g. semiotic resources, lifestyle, and taste, offer alternative perspectives into social classification. This paper investigates the deployment of semiotic resources by a group of highly mobile 'elite migrants', in an attempt to understand social change and class (re)stratification that characterize contemporary Chinese society.

The elite migrant participants of the present study are a group of Saab car possessors who have moved to and lived in Shanghai for a prolonged period of time, and have situated themselves in the middle strata of the host society. An expanding body of literature addresses the recent phenomenal migration inside China (Han, 2001; Lu & Zhang, 2001; Zhang, Qu & Zou, 2003; Fan, 2004, 2005; Lu, 2005; Woronov, 2004). And the linguistic aspects of labor migrants have attracted an increase of research attention (e.g. Dong 2009, 2011; Dong & Blommaert 2009, 2010). However, we know little about the socio-

[1] I would like to thank Jan Blommaert, Sjaak Kroon, and the anonymous reviewer for their valuable comments on this paper. My gratitude goes to Xiaoli, Yunya, Pingyao, Jeff, Buyi, EJ whose insights open my eyes to their world and help me with theorization of their voice.

linguistic aspects of elite migrants, apart from the facts that they have a number of languages or language varieties at their disposal, and that they go through an upscaling process in which they are able to draw on their linguistic resources and negotiate their positions in the social order of the host society. Elite migrants often escape research attention in the field of sociolinguistics partly because we tend to emphasize marginality and inequality in migration studies. It becomes pressing to obtain a more in-depth understanding of elite migrants, especially when they bring diverse cultural and linguistic features, and together with labor migrants, transform urban centers into superdiverse metropoles (Vertovec 2006, 2007; Blommaert 2011a). Moreover, both types of migration, labor as well as elite migration, are part of a bigger and more general process – globalization – in which we observe fast flow of capital, people, goods, and information across country borders and across continents (Blommaert 2011b). Along with the increase of GDP and the development of a huge industrial proletariat, also elite migrants are a social and cultural effect of globalization in China.

In what follows, I shall distinguish two sets of semiotic resources that the elite migrant participants have control of: first, their linguistic repertoire of mobility, and second, the in-group discourses that flag their social distinction. Bringing the two sets of semiotic resources together, I shall demonstrate how different forms of voice articulate the different angles and directions of their class distinction. Before engaging with the fieldwork data, a brief sketch of the theoretical tools is in order.

2. Social (re)stratification and its 'soft' indicators

Different from that of Northern America or Western Europe where there are more or less established class systems, social class is a concept subject to heated debates among lay people as well as academics in contemporary China. The established view is that the state was born out of a proletarian revolution in the first half of the twentieth century, in which the proletariat seized public power and founded the nation on the basis of the scientific socialism ideal of the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist tradition. During the thirty years or so of planned economy era (more or less between 1949 and 1979), class structure was rather neatly defined: a peasant class and an industrial working class which included a class fraction of intellectuals and the party cadres. Both classes belonged to the proletariat, and the means of production were turned into state property (Lu 2002; Li 2007a).

The economic reform of the 1980's however has posed theoretical as well as practical challenges to this class categorization. Theoretically, a social group which emerges out of the now partly privatized economy, and which thus has the control over the capital and over the means of production, can hardly fit into either class. Practically, we have witnessed reshuffles of classes and class fractions at least in three respects: first, the rapidly polarized distribution of power and social wealth has given birth to such groups as the 'new rich' and the 'privileged'; second, the glory of the working class that used to be emblematic of the advanced and revolutionary social force has quickly faded out, and in this process being an urban industrial worker is downscaled, at least in the eyes of lay people, from a source of prestige to an unwanted identity; third, the transitional period has created a special class fraction – rural-urban migrant workers. All of this is richly documented in the public and media debate in China: these issues are of concern to many contemporary Chinese (Dong 2011).

As for the middle class, the debates are centered around the question of how to define it. A remarkable similarity shared among the middle class is their *denial* of middle class membership. 'I am not rich enough' and 'there is no middle class in China' are among the most frequently given answers. Because there is no widely accepted criterion in China, they compare themselves to the middle class of the United States and conclude that, if measured against the US standards, there is no middle class in China. Perhaps confusion surrounding the term is not unique to China, but it is remarkable in China because of its communist orthodoxies in the past and of the theoretical difficulties the term poses to the

social frame at present. Another term 'people of middle income' (zhongdeng shouru zhe) is often used in the mass media and other public and official discourses (Li 2007a, 2007b). This term however is inadequate, at least for a social scientist, because income does not necessarily coincide with social class, and members of middle class may not fall into the middle income distribution of a society.

It is beyond the scope of the present research to conclusively define the Chinese middle class; yet it is safe to say that there is a group of people, and perhaps a very large group, who socio-economically fall between the working class and the (relatively small but powerful) 'upper class' of ultra-rich in contemporary Chinese society. In addition, following Bourdieu (1984), the middle class will define itself by means of specific activities – class praxis – reflecting and fortifying class consciousness. Such activities include forms of consumption, the discursive and semiotic expression and display of 'taste' in a variety of cultural and consumer domains, and these activities will be of particular interest here.

Taste, according to Bourdieu (1984), is an acquired disposition towards cultural goods and practices, both reflective and formative of social class positions. It is closely related to education level and social origins. The formulation and articulation of individual taste is 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 expressions of habitus, and in the life-style related sub-spaces such as furniture, clothing, language, food, body hexis people tend to display fairly consistent disposition and practices.

'Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu1984:6). It therefore functions as a 'soft' indicator that produces social groups and marks space boundaries by bringing certain people together and keeping others apart. A working class man would find spending big money on a wedding party wasteful, but such expenditures could be a prime necessity and obligatory elements to middle class people. The latter might see the costly wedding party a successful investment in social capital and in networking, which consequently generates social as well as physical separation of life spaces (1984:375). Taste groups people and posits them in certain circles and spaces by means of complexes of recognizable, emblematic features of behavior, comportment, consumption and speech (cf. also Blommaert & Varis 2012).

Another notion used in this paper is voice, an aspect of the way in which the semiotic resources are deployed. The concept of voice has a complex history of development and has acquired diverse meanings and models of application along its ways of formation. One main theoretical source is the Bakhtinian notion of voice which distinguishes social voice from individual voice and emphasizes the social dimension of this notion (Bakhtin 1981, 1984). Another line of conceptualizing voice emphasizes the form-function relationships. This can be traced back to Jakobson's structuralism, and it is more clearly formulated in Hymes's (1964) and Gumperz's (1982) work. Following this tradition, Blommaert (2005: 68) argues that voice is primarily the capacity to make oneself understood by others. It is, in other words, the capacity to realize intended functions by mobilizing semiotic resources available to oneself, the capacity of people to create preferred interactional effects by mapping semiotic forms onto functions. Blommaert and others underscore that voice fundamentally is a social issue complicated by globalization, because the mobility of semiotic instruments and skills in a globalized context always affects the functional efficacy of these resources. Mobility and space hence become pressing concerns for voice in a globalized context (cf. Blommaert & Dong 2010; Dong & Blommaert 2009).

Some linguistic resources, such as standard accents, are highly mobile and index prestige, whereas others are stigmatizing and strictly locked in local and private domains. As Hymes (1996) and Blommaert (2005) define it, voice always happens in combination with power effects and with the risk of not being understood. Voice exists because of 'non-voice': "such a capacity [viz., being able to make oneself understood] is not self-evident […] [it] is subject to sev-

eral conditions and constraints […] when people move through physical and social space […] they move through orders of indexicality affecting their ability to deploy communicative resources" (Blommaert 2005: 68-69). An example of being 'voice-less' can be found in Dong and Blommaert (2009) which describes an episode that a migrant worker – a cleaner who worked in a urban recreation center in a middle class residential neighborhood in Beijing – was effectively silenced by her urban interlocutors. The elite migrants of this study also display subtle and complex voices, perhaps less straightforward in terms of power effects and constraints of their own voices, but it is useful to consider the voice problem they create for others who do not have access to the highly mobile linguistic resources. Let us take a close look at the elite migrants and their voices.

3. Situating the group and data collection

The data of the present research are drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork between 2010 and 2012 among a group of elite migrants who share a common feature of driving Saab cars in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Shenzhen. The group members are scattered in various cities because they initially are brought to each other from an online forum in which they exchange technical information on Saab cars, driving experiences, as well as their passion for the brand. Their interactions gradually become 'offline' around 2009 when they discover more similarities among themselves than just their shared preference for a brand of automobiles. For instance, they all play golf, they travel abroad frequently, each of the male members smokes cigars and has a handsome collection of wines. A majority of them hold foreign academic diplomas and have spent prolonged period of time in another country. Another factor that lead the participants to form a circle is that Saab car dealers lower the price in the Chinese market in 2009, and therefore Saab cars become more affordable to those who are 'not exactly the same type of people'. Interestingly, it seems when Saab becomes more democratic, the group – the earlier generation of Saab fans – creates exclusivity by adding more features of exclusivity such as traveling, golf, cigars, etc. More features, in other words, become part of the 'register' of identity they construct. It is no longer enough just to be a Saab fan, one now needs to show and perform all the enregistered features of distinction in an ordered way to create identity (Blommaert & Varis 2011).

Sociolinguistically Shanghai has its distinct language variety – Shanghainese – an umbrella term for the vernaculars spoken in Shanghai and its adjunct area. It is mutually unintelligible with other Chinese languages and language varieties, for instances Mandarin and Cantonese. Shanghainese used to be a regional lingua franca, given the economic power of its speakers since the late Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911 A.D.), until the recent introduction of Putonghua as a national linguistic standard (Dong 2010). Moreover, the large number of internal migrants have profoundly changed the 'linguistic landscape' of the city. Shanghai is one of the largest and richest cities in China. Of its 23 million plus inhabitants, more than two fifths are immigrants from other part of the country, many from surrounding regions such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, but increasingly from farther provinces such as Henan, Sichuan, and Jiangxi[2]. Internal migrants bring along diverse linguistic and cultural belongings and turn to Putonghua as a common platform of effective communication (Lei 2009; Tsou 2009; Van den Berg 2009; Xu 2009; Yu 2009). Though shrinking to the largely private domain of social life, Shanghainese still serves as a strong marker of local identity, and perhaps still is a symbolic source for pride among a relatively small number of 'pure' Shanghainese people (Hu 1995).

About half of the elite participants are 'pure' Shanghainese people, and the other half originally are form various part of the country. The immediate context of this paper is a wedding party of a Saab group member. The newly-wed couple invited their guests to a golf resort in suburban Shanghai where the ceremony was held. There were more than 200 guests, and about one third stayed overnight. Apart from the expenditures of the ceremony and banquet, all hotel

[2] The sixth national population census **http://www.stats.gov.cn/zgrkpc/dlc/**. Last viewed on 27 Dec 2011.

rooms of the guests were provided by the couple. Such a luxurious wedding might sound unnecessarily expensive to many; but for the couple, it perhaps was, in the Bourdieuan fashion, an inevitable investment in social capital with foreseeable materialization. The couple generously allowed my participation to the event as an ethnographic researcher. I was able to observe the event, to participate in the activities, to collect documents such as leaflets, and to interview the guests. All participants gave their consent to the use of data in reporting the research results and in the possible publication

I managed to interview 5 participants in length (about 2 hours each), plus a number of shorter interviews (ranging between 5 and 30 minutes) of individuals and groups. Interviews were conducted in an informal conversation-like manner, and the topics were organized around their life history and their perceptions of life-style, hobbies, social class, and language varieties such as Putonghua, English, Shanghai local dialect, and their home dialects (e.g. the Northeast dialects, the Henan dialects). All interviewees involved in the present research happen to be male, because the Saab group are overwhelmingly male. The interviews were carried out in Putonghua right before, during, or immediately after the wedding ceremony. I translated the transcripts in English. Other data types included observed episodes recorded in my field notes, online digital data on and around this group, documents collected during and beyond the weddings.

I have addressed the issue of the class stratification and its 'soft' indicators in the Chinese context – or more specifically, in the urban centers such as Shanghai; we situate the group of participants in the macro social and linguistic contexts of contemporary Shanghai, as well as in the micro contexts of a costly wedding in a golf course of suburban Shanghai. Their symbolic restratifying behavior revolves around a cluster of features and details, of which the semiotic resources are one part. Next I shall illustrate the two sets of semiotic resources – repertoire of mobility and in-group discourses – through interview data and online documents produced by and for the group.

4. Repertoires of mobility

Linguistic resources are never distributed in a random way. In every society, varieties of language, genres, styles and registers are distributed according to the logic of the social system, and sociolinguistic analysis has from its inception addressed these non-random aspects of distribution (cf. Hymes 1996). Turning to linguistic resources, therefore, can lead us straight into the heart of class stratification and restratification in China.

The first set of resources is the participants' linguistic repertoire of mobility. The group members distinguish themselves by means of repertoires of mobility, articulated in two directions. First, they have adopted Putonghua, the national linguistic standard, which offers them pan-Chinese mobility. Second, they have acquired English which offers them global mobility. Let us first take a look at the interview of a group member on his evaluations of Shanghainese, his home dialect (a Northeastern accent), and Putonghua.

4.1 Language of internal-Chinese mobility

Interviewee C is a senior manager working in the financial industry. He is in his early forties. He spends his youth in Dalian, a coastal city in the Northeastern China, obtains his bachelor degree in Shanghai, goes on to the UK for postgraduate education, and returns to Shanghai ten years ago. His leisure activities include playing golf with business partners and friends, smoking cigars, reading books. He is married and has two children.

Extract 1: 'I don't feel like speaking Shanghainese'[3]

1 DJ: So do you {nin您 the respect form of ‚you'} speak Shanghainese?

2 Interviewee C: No I don't {quick reply, different from his usual slow pace of utterance}.

[3] Transcription conventions:
- '_' (underline) stress
- '=' interruption or next utterance following immediately
- '{ }' transcriber's comment
- '* *' segment quieter than surrounding talk, or weaker than the rest of the sentence
- '( )' omitted part in the utterance

3 DJ: You did your undergraduate study in Shanghai?
4 Interviewee C: *That's right*.
5 DJ: Didn't you have to learn Shanghainese when you were in college, being here for so many years?
6 Interviewee C: Well, (I) *rather* reject…
7 DJ: Reject learning Shanghainese?
8 Interviewee C: No, just I *don't feel like speaking* (Shanghainese)
9 DJ: Then do you feel inconvenient sometimes?
10 Interviewee C: *I don't* feel that way.
11 DJ: In your daily life, go shopping… and so on?
12 Interviewee C: Nope, it's fine *as long as (we) understand* (each other).
…
13 DJ: You just said you don't like the language, why is that?
14 Interviewee C: It is a personal thing. Shanghainese isn't masculine enough, so I never really made any effort to learn it. And (I am) a bit rebellious, many people want to squeeze into Shanghai, want to learn Shanghainese, my college mate, a big bloke from the North {make noises and gestures mimicking a big guy learning the rather 'feminine' speech; laughing voice of DJ and the interviewee} did his best to learn Shanghainese, in order to 'integrate' (to the local society), it is the same with us who were abroad, deliberately learn their accent, a 'pure' London accent, it is too deliberate, and I don't feel like that, language is a communicative tool
…
15 DJ: Do you ever feel you are a Shanghainese?
16 Interviewee C: (hesitant) I am, I am, I am quite confused, what should I be, the boundaries of regions and countries become rather vague… but it is true that 'in one place, people are alike (yifang shuitu yang yifang ren)', their language, their characteristics, their temper, and so on, there are similarities, but more is individual differences I would say… I find it difficult to define where I came from, my father was from Anhui, my mother is a Manchu people, and I used to live in various places too. I spent about 15 or 16 years in Dalian, but it's been long (since I left there), I don't really like the culture there.

[Fieldwork recording-2011-12-09-V21-28:00]

The interview is a fragment of metapragmatic discourse of an elite migrant on his perceptions of local Shanghainese, of the culture of his home town, and of his identities. This example is primarily concerned with the voice of Interviewee C – his way of articulating meaning in a given social environment – but in his utterances, we can distinguish voices of his college mate and voices circulated at a public level as meaning making moments. As a whole, it shows the relationships between Shanghainese and Interviewee C's home dialect, and Putonghua is seen as the 'background color' taken for granted in the conversation. The interview can be analyzed into three parts according to the style of the interviewee's utterance . The first part (turn 1-12) consists of quick turns and short answers. This is a negotiation stage of interview in which the ethnographer is eager to draw out more detailed answers whereas the interviewee adopts a defensive mode and withdraws to a safe zone by giving brief responses such as 'That's right' (turn 4), and 'I don't feel that way' (turn 10). I use the polite form of the second person pronoun 'nin (您, you)', instead of the usual 'ni (你, you)', in order to show him my respect, but it is also my attempt to stress that I am harmless and that he could be less defensive in talking to me. Though Interviewee C gives quick and short answers in this part, his utterances are produced in a low and slow manner, which may signal hesitation and being careful in giving opinions. However, there is something unusual in turn 2: he gives a quick and definite answer 'No I don't' to my question whether he could speak Shanghainese. He moves to Shanghai in his late teens, spends significant years both before and after

his UK period, and therefore one would expect that the local language had become part of his linguistic repertoire. He perhaps has considered it, inferred from his unusually quick reply, and might feel strongly about it. He uses a strong word 'rejected (paichi, 排斥)' to voice his idea about learning Shanghainese (turn 6).

In part two (turn 14) our conversation proceeds to a more comfortable stage marked by longer and more fluent responses given by Interviewee C. He articulates an elaborated comment on Shanghainese and explains two reasons of rejecting the language. The first reason is related to the stereotypical ideas circulated in lay people towards Shanghainese, that Shanghainese is rather 'feminine', and it therefore is not a language for him, a man from the Northeast. In the sociocultural geography of China, there are regions that have stereotypical attributes such as the Northeast being a place for 'real men' as opposed to the 'effeminate' South (Long 1998). Note that such metadiscursive labels personify speech and impose social distinction by connecting sound patterns to attributes of speakers (cf. Agha 2003).

The second reason, related to the first one, comes from a negative reaction to the prevailing phenomenon that many people attempt to establish themselves in Shanghai and to 'become' Shanghai people. Entering the city, however, does not automatically qualify one as a local. Accent usually is a remarkable and persistent marker of social space, and in order to achieve a locally ratified identity, one has to be able to speak the local language in a 'proper' way. The 'big bloke' – Interviewee C's college mate – makes serious efforts to learn Shanghainese in order to achieve a local identity. Here we differentiate another voice (in Bakhtin's sense), a mixture of Shanghainese with a Northern accent represented in an amusing way, and this performance triggers laughter. Presenting an accent in an amusing way in fact disqualifies it; rarely would anyone suggest Putonghua being 'funny' or 'terrible' – Putonghua is just 'normal' (Dong 2010; cf. Silverstein 1996 for a discussion of a similar phenomenon in American English). While others are eager to acquire the local language and to achieve a local identity, Interviewee C is able to bypass such boundaries by the use of Putonghua in the process of establishing himself in the urban center. His rejection of Shanghainese can be seen as part of the distinction: I am in Shanghai as an 'elite' migrant, which is why I don't speak the local vernacular.

Part three (turn 16) is concerned with Interviewee C's complicated migration trajectory and the evaluation on his own identities. Being asked on identity-related questions, Interviewee C resumes his slow pace of articulation and hesitates for about three seconds before giving his answer. He rejects a Shanghai identity, and one expects that he would claim an identity of Dalian where he spent most of his youth. However, he is critical toward the culture of Dalian and does not ascribe a Dalian identity to himself. Throughout the interview he hardly shows any trace of Dalian accent. This historical trace of locality has been erased. Putonghua has been the language that enables him to move to and live in various places within the country, including his prolonged stay in Shanghai. Earlier he explicitly rejects Shanghai local vernacular and the identity indexed by the language; and here he actively articulates distance from his home culture. It is clear that he rejects a particular regional identity; his preferred language – Putonghua – signals his distinction: he is not locked into a specific place, he is mobile all over China. Putonghua therefore appears to be the language of pan-Chinese mobility, the linguistic resource of a growing class of professionals whose specialized labor can be deployed in any part of China.

4.2 The language of global mobility

While Putonghua is the language of internal mobility, English is another mobility related resource that distinguishes the elite migrants from most other people. One of the recurrent topics of the elite participants is the choice of emigration to another country. It is reported that of the 1,070,000 plus people who have studied abroad since 1978, merely one forth return to China (Zhang 2011). With the recent US policies of attracting foreign investments to revive its economy, comes a new policy of legal

migration into the US. One can obtain a US permanent resident permit upon spending more than 50,000 USD in the US to purchase a house[4]. 'Becoming an American' seems to have become a cheaper and easier way[5] of getting out of China, compared to the traditional route of obtaining a foreign diploma and competing in the labor market of the host society. Other immigration destinations such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are also attractive to those who can afford it. Let us look at an elite interviewee's evaluation on emigration.

Extract 2: 'Sooner or later to send my child abroad'

1 Interviewee P: Well, about this (emigration), anyway, hmm, it is also something I am puzzled, a confusing factor, (I am) hesitating (about it), actually deep in my heart I feel I am a Chinese, although there are many problems here (in China)… but being here doesn't mean (we can) pass (the good things) onto (our children), so I am not clear about that, anyway, emigration is something to do sooner or later, the question is when

2 DJ: Emigration is something to do sooner or later

3 Interviewee P: Yea, at least it is sooner or later (for me) to send my child (abroad). (I) have to consider many factors, of course economic factors, there are more opportunities to make money in China.

[Fieldwork recording-2011-12-09-V22-1:00:42]

In this short piece of interview extract, Interviewee P gives rich information on the push and pull factors of emigration. Similar to Interviewee C, Interviewee P is a professional in the financial industry. He is around forty, and he has spent more than ten years in Shanghai. This interview is triggered by the conversations of several group members, in which emigration is a recurrent topic that raised debates and arguments. I therefore decide to modify the interview plan and ask him about his perceptions of emigration.

Among the various factors that Interviewee P has to take in to consideration, providing his children with a better education appears to be a decisive reason for emigration. In a transitional society such as China today, while the poor are struggling to move upwards to the middle ranges of society, people who are already in the middle layer have to ensure their social position by moving further up (Dong 2011). One way of maintaining their social status is to maximize their economic and cultural capital and to make the most out of the educational system. Consequently we observe that parents and children collectively enter a ruthless race for academic qualification from kindergarten onward at an individual level, and at a societal level, an increasingly competitive labor market (cf. Bourdieu 1984:132). The notorious 'commercialization of education provision' makes this even worse. One possibility of escaping such competition is to send young children to elite private schools and have them prepared for the US SAT or the UK A-Levels, rather than the Chinese National University Entrance Examination. This route is extremely costly, but the elite migrants who not only are mobile within China, but also mobile at a global scale, find it a real prospect for them, because they have acquired the language of global mobility: English. Elite migrants articulate a clear understanding of how moving up the scale of globalization involves moving up its sociolinguistic scale as well, and that English, consequently, is a requirement for such upscaling moves. As Interviewee P points out, that 'it is sooner or later (for me) to send my child (abroad)' (turn 3). His knowledge of English, as well as his global experience, are necessary conditions which enable him to realistically consider the prospect of emigration, at least emigration of his children. And only those who have English in their linguistic repertoire can entertain such ideas realistically. English is acquired in their personal histories of mobility, and it enables their further and continued mobility globally.

Apart from emigration, there are various other forms of global mobility that the elite migrants demonstrate through their use of English in the

[4] Information collected from conversations among the elite participants.

[5] One could hardly afford a one bedroom flat in Beijing or Shanghai with 50,000 USD.

Figure 1: Mixture of English and Chinese in the online forum

Translation:
TOP GEAR 18 shows a test of SAAB 9-5, the petrol consumption is amazingly low [smily face]
Almost 4l/100KM.
Fxxk GM...

[This message is edited by vvspy at 16:07 12-02-2012]

wedding party and beyond. For instance, Figure 1 shows a mixture of English and Chinese used in an entry of the online Saab discussion forum. English is used for the blogger's user ID (vspy), the name of the British television series about motor vehicles (TOP GEAR), Saab, and the American automobile producer GM.

The blogger discusses a Top Gear episode[6] which highlights the low petrol consumption of a Saab car. Interestingly, Top Gear is not broadcasted from Chinese official TV stations, and thus its fans can only download it from the Internet. Moreover, the episodes accessible from the Internet do not have Chinese subtitles, and that requires its viewers to have a high level of English proficiency as well as of cultural background knowledge in order to understand what is going on. In the virtual world where movement seems to be freer and easier, there are also barriers, maybe less salient, but people still have to mobilize resources such as English in order to access information of the other part of the world, to achieve effective communication or to voice their opinions.

Another example of trying to have their voice heard globally through English is the group members' recent efforts in 'Save Saab' from bankruptcy. When Saab filed for bankruptcy, the Chinese Saab owners displayed tremendous brand loyalty and publicly pledged to save Saab (Figure 2).

Figure 2: 'SAVE SAAB' gathering

While all participants are Chinese, interestingly, the slogans are bilingual, and the majority part is in English: in the big red banner, English is ahead of Chinese, and only English can be found in the various smaller signs. It is highly possible that the participants are voicing their opinions not (only) to a Chinese audience – although the photo is circulated widely in the Chinese webpages and online forums – but also to a global audience, to a worldwide community of Saab fans, to the Sweden car manufacturer, and to the US and the

6 http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/v1V__Zh_YHg/ the online episode of Top Gear 18-1. Last viewed on 15 Feb 2012.

Dutch owners of the brand. Moreover, it voices the particular identity of the participants – passionate supporters and possessors of a global brand of high-end automobiles – and drawing on English gives this identity a real global relevance.

The data presented so far show that the elite migrants have acquired the language of national mobility – Putonghua – in their linguistic repertoire and thus claim a pan-Chinese identity. They also have the language of global mobility – English – at their disposal so that they are able to access information which is otherwise exclusive to Chinese people, to voice their opinions as well as identities, and to see emigration as a realistic prospect. They therefore are mobile at a pan-Chinese scale due to their capacity in Putonghua, and they are mobile globally due to English at their disposal. I therefore define their repertoires as repertoires of mobility at various scale-levels, which points back to their personal histories of mobility and forwards to their continued mobility. Further, these resources – the first set of resources discussed in this paper – shape conditions for voice in relation to out-groups: the resources enable mobile voices, voices that can speak and be heard anywhere and are not 'placed' or confined to a particular place.

5 Markers of in-group discourses

The second set of resources is in-group discourse, that is, particular ways of speaking about themselves that flag their distinction. A remarkable in-group marker that appeared recurrently in the conversations of the elite migrants is a Chinese word 'mensao (闷骚)'. In the interviews a number of the elite migrants explicitly referred to the word in an attempt to explain their choice of Saab car as well as their 'choice' of each other as member of a group. The word therefore emerges from the data pool as an important element, a key to understand their in-group dynamics, or a discursive resource that posits them in the particular social order (Kroon & Sturm 2007).

'Mensao' refers to both males and females who appear to be calm and inconspicuous but deep inside they are extremely passionate and are able to explode into performance if required. It is a kind of 'coolness' highly valued among the group members. Let us take a look at how Interviewee A constructed it in the following interview extract.

Extract 3: 'Mensao (闷骚)'

1 …… {noise, laughters in the hall, people chatting on the phone, wedding in preparation, people checking in their hotel rooms}
2 DJ: So what are the similarities of this circle of people?
3 Interviewee : You mean us?
4 DJ: = hmm.
5 Interviewee A: = How should I put it, to put it straightforwardly, it is the personality of *'mensao (闷骚)'* {smiling voice, lower voice than the rest of the utterance, excited, a mixture of being embarrassed and being proud}
6 Interviewee A: Hehehe{laughing loudly}
7 DJ: {laughing with a low voice}
8 Interviewee A: That is to say {his tone becomes calmer and more serious}, people of our circle are not those who love to show off their wealth, everyone is rather sincere, that's about it, everyone, inside everyone, it's not arrogant, but deep inside (we are) quite self confident, and we want to show (ourselves), but not show off openly, Saab is like that
9 DJ: = not flaunting…
10 Interviewee A: = yeah not flaunting. And yeah Saab is like that, the appearance of Saab car isn't very attractive, but its technical advantages, its performance, really fast when accelerating… there is another side (of Saab), but (both Saab and us) don't like showing off, because of the shared characteristics, we feel comfortable of each other's company

[Fieldwork recording-2011-12-10-V31-3:31]

Interviewee A is in his early thirties and works as a senior manager in the financial industry. He has been in Shanghai since 2003 when he returns from the UK, has obtained his undergraduate diploma from a prestige British university, and

acquired his initial work experiences in the financial City of London. He originally is from Henan province of central China. The interview is centered around 'mensao' as a shared characteristic of the group members as well as the attractiveness of a Saab car to its fans. Immediately prior to the interview, Interviewee A is talking about the price of Saab cars, and for that price, one could have opted for BMW or Mercedes. Saab in actual fact is much less known and stylistically understated. This evaluation thus leads to the interview topic. Before spelling out the word 'mensao', Interviewee A is calm and smooth in speaking, with a flat tone. However, he becomes a little hesitant while searching for a word 'How should I put it' in turn 5, and quickly 'to put it straightforwardly'. This moment of hesitation indicates that he is trying to find a more indirect way of labeling him and his fellow group members, but realizes that there is no better word than the 'mensao'. It is possible that he is considering whether I, the researcher, is a harmless person with whom he could be 'straightforward'. He spells out the word with a voice that is lower than the rest of his utterance, as if he is telling me a secret. Moreover, his loud laughter (turn 6) right after pronouncing the word is rather sudden, and perhaps too loud, which signals a sense of embarrassment. In fact such reaction is found in every interview while the elite migrants are trying to describe themselves: hesitation, pronouncing the word 'mensao', and giggling or loud laughter. It is clear that the word points to subtle but important in-group meanings that are not normally shared by outsiders such as the researcher.

Therefore 'mensao' is a particular kind of 'coolness' they constructed, and that they modeled on the coolness they saw in Saab cars. Interviewee A describes their kind of 'coolness' in turn 8 and says that 'Saab is like that', and he repeats this point in turn 10 'there is another side (of Saab), but (both Saab and us) don't like showing off'. 'Mensao' therefore is not only the shared characteristic of the group members but also that of the Saab car. Interestingly, a Saab commercial constructed a similar image (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Saab car ad: Release me

Figure 3 shows a Saab commercial released in 2007[7]. The English slogan 'Release Me' is the title of the commercial song which tells a story of longing for passion and freedom. Its Chinese equivalence '释放无可抵挡 (shifang wukedidang)' means 'set me free, nothing can stop me'. In the photo a silver-colored Saab car, shining its front lights, is in motion and stirs up a wave of clear blue water. The commercial (the photo, the song, the commercial music video) projects an image of 'coolness', 'passion', and 'longing for freedom' to the car. The car owners internalize these qualities into their own habitus, and tend to think of these images as a reflection their personality features. They not only buy a Saab car. They develop their identities in relation to consumption patterns, that is to say, they convert a consumption act (purchasing a car) into an identity act of the consumer (something that can reveal 'who I am'). The group members have a shared taste and this taste leads them to the car and to each other. Taste is like a match-maker 'it marries colors and also people… two people can give each other no better proof of the affinity of their tastes than the tastes they have for each other' (Bourdieu 1984:243). Taste organizes social as well as physical space so that some people are brought together – such as the group members – and others are separated. Marcuse (1964) argued in 'one-dimensional man' that the European and US middle classes increasingly organized their identities with reference to consumption patterns (Blommaert & Varis 2011). The Saab group members who mark themselves 'mensao' serve as an explicit illustration of how

7 http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/ivBGBPOY9i8/. Last viewed on 16-02-2012.

people model and describe themselves in relation to features of a commodity, a Saab car.

Consequently the second set of resources I have discussed in this paper is the particular kind of in-group discourse, instantiated by and revolving around the word 'mensao', in articulating the desired personality features projected by their consumption patterns which distinguish them from outsiders. These personality features are explicitly organized according to a comparison with Saab cars. These discursive and identity resources shape conditions for in-group voice: this is the register by means of which they self-identify and shape, identify and evaluate behavioral expectations in their own group.

6 Conclusions

I have identified two sets of semiotic resources and argued that they are different forms of voice and articulate the different angles and directions of class distinction: (a) external criteria of membership, expressed by their control of resources that are not tied to one place but offer the mobility that characterizes their class; (b) internal criteria of membership ('mensao') connected to and predicated on knowledge of particular consumption commodities, here: Saab cars. We see, in sum, a multidimensional complex of voice, internal as well as external and with several scales being oriented towards. It is through the resources discussed here that the Saab friends create an identifiable 'middle class' voice in contemporary China. They acquire and display prestige linguistic resources such as Putonghua and English, and they develop a particular in-group register for talking among as well as about themselves. As we can see, these 'soft' resources are anchored in a more objective range of factors: elite consumption patterns, international educational backgrounds and prestige functions in very well-paid industrial branches. The 'hard' diacritics of class need to be – and will be, according to Bourdieu – reflected in an ordered range of 'soft' diacritics by means of which these people create and maintain class boundaries between themselves and others.

Significantly, what sets this group apart is *mobility* across different scale levels. They are mobile within China and they are also members of a globally mobile community who can entertain plans for leisure travel abroad as well as emigration to other parts of the world. Class stratification appears to be strongly connected to the potential for mobility one can realistically claim. The 'soft' capital offering such forms of mobility is lodged in specific linguistic repertoires, and thus in the capacity of these people to make themselves understood in various places, in different social environments and across the different scale-levels that are involved in global professional and personal mobility.

Needless to say, this mobility potential is still an exclusive commodity in contemporary China. The rapid expansion of the class of well-paid young urban professionals must not obscure that most Chinese are not in a position now to entertain realistic plans of international mobility; this fact is not likely to change in the near future. 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 language varieties and 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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Note on the Author

Jie DONG is Associate Professor at Tsinghua University, China. She earned her PhD in sociolinguistics at Tilburg University, the Netherlands. Her books include Discourse, Identity, and China's Internal Migration and Ethnographic Fieldwork.