Internet Celebrities, Foreign Speakers, and Chinese Learning: The Case of MYBY on YouTube

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Abstract:
This article studies internet celebrity culture as a crucial site of public learning and pedagogy, exploring the capacity of celebrated foreign speakers of Chinese to popularize discourses and knowledge of the language on social media. It specifically focuses on the YouTube channel MYBY founded by Martin Wiley Woods and Blair Sugarman, two foreign television personalities in China who have successfully extended their fame from traditional media to the internet. Through a multimodal discourse analysis of their bilingual 'talk shows' in which they evaluate the Chinese pronunciation and accents of other non-native speakers and share their own learning experiences, we discuss how Woods and Sugarman perform their identities as both model learners and language influencers by producing and challenging the language ideologies of normativity and speakerhood. We argue that internet celebrity pedagogy is an increasingly important genre of popular culture that discursively shapes the global transmission of Chinese language and linguaculture.

Keywords: internet celebrity, language influencers, celebrity pedagogy, Chinese learning, language ideology, social media, YouTube

Internet Celebrities, Foreign Speakers, and Chinese Learning: The Public Pedagogy of MYBY on YouTube

Introduction

According to Abidin (2018: 14-6), internet celebrity refers to celebrities who use both traditional and social media platforms to manage their fame and build audiences on a global scale that are made up of loyal followers and casual viewers instead of a niche group. They pursue fame professionally as a vocation, and produce thematic content which can demonstrate their extraordinary talents while displaying selective snippets of everyday life to maintain a sense of ordinariness. This article focuses on two such internet celebrities, Martin Wiley Woods (吴孟天) and Blair Sugarman (布莱尔), who first rose to fame on China's mainstream media programmes that drew attention to foreigners speaking Chinese. Subsequently, the two have expanded their profile to social media, using YouTube and other platforms to further publicize their extraordinary language talent in Chinese and their celebrity persona through co-created self-promoting videos. The duo represents an emerging scene of popular culture that revolves around foreign speakers of Chinese whose celebrity status is endorsed by the mainstream media as successful language learners, while also gaining popularity and fandom through self-produced social media activities and discourses built around their raciolinguistic identity as foreigners, namely, racially marked non-native speakers of Chinese.

Similar to their predecessors such as Da Shan, a Canadian who became the first foreign celebrity back in 1988 for performing in the Chinese language on state media, Woods (henceforth MW) and Sugarman (henceforth BS) embarked on their celebrityship by frequently appearing on television hits such as *Chinese Bridge* (2002-present), an annual international contest show for foreign students of Chinese, and *A Bright World* (2015-2017), a talk-show series with a full cast of foreigners speaking fluent Chinese. Through these shows, which aim to create an official and transnational spectacle for Chinese-speaking foreigners and, in turn, the Chinese language and culture, an increasing number of foreigners have gained celebrity status. Some of them, notably MW and BS, further spin it off onto social media platforms of global reach for self-branding as successful learners and keen promoters of Chinese. In 2016, WM and BS jointly founded the YouTube channel MYBY, which has garnered 261,000 subscribers as of early 2022.[1] The pair, from America and Britain, respectively, are self-

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[1] MW and BS were also active on other social media platforms. Most of their YouTube videos can be found on Bilibili, a very popular Chinese video-sharing website. They also regularly updated their personal accounts on Weibo and Instagram.

presented as highly educated and successful young (Anglophone-white) men. Their videos discuss a broad range of topics, mostly sharing intercultural experiences involving their life in China and views on issues in popular and youth culture, such as entertainment, gender and relationship, all fluently in Chinese. What is noteworthy and pertinent to this article is that, throughout their videos, MW and BS persistently showcase themselves as model foreign speakers and, in some of the videos, explicitly comment and offer advice on the use or learning of Chinese language and culture, therefore acting as public pedagogues to influence perceptions about Chinese and other languages and approaches to language learning.

While some scholars have argued that the Chinese media industries make foreigners perform Chinese to promote nationalism (Gorfinkel and Chubb 2015), the case of MYBY points us to something else. It illustrates, we suggest, that foreign speakers of Chinese may have a degree of agency through their celebrityship on social media and utilize it to produce a form of vernacular pedagogy by popularizing bottom-up discourses of language and learning from their own non-native-speaking perspectives. In this sense, the case invites us to consider the extent to which internet celebrity culture, as a growing subgenre of popular culture, operates as a site of social learning and public pedagogy. In what follows, we will first discuss the theoretical perspective on the intersection of internet celebrity, language learning and public pedagogy, before analysing how MW and BS develop as celebrity language pedagogues and construct a distinct social media discourse about what counts as 'good' Chinese and how to learn Chinese. We argue that language celebrity culture online opens up a pedagogical space in which the cultural politics of normativity about language, speakerhood and learning is simultaneously reproduced and challenged and, nevertheless, serves the neoliberal celebrity agenda of self-branding.

Internet celebrities, language influencers and public pedagogy

Celebrity culture revolves around 'collections of sense-making practices whose main resources of meaning are celebrity' (Couldry 2012: 159). Since celebrities are highly visible and readily discussed in everyday lives, increasingly across media platforms, many studies have examined how they shape contemporary culture and serve as a 'lingua franca of identity' (Marshall 2006: 3) for people to communicate shared belongings with one another in the public sphere. In the founding issue of *Celebrity Studies*, Turner (2010) called for greater attention to the cultural functions of celebrities in constructing and influencing, such as the effects celebrities have on 'what people regard as desirable or acceptable in their everyday lives' (17), rather than simply

representing and mediating social identities. A growing number of studies argue for the 'pedagogical function' of celebrities (Marshall 2010: 36; Gray et al. 2018; Duvall and Heckemeyer 2018; Marston 2019; Wilson 2011). Dyson (1993), for example, evaluates the cultural meanings of the American Olympian Michael Jordan and how his athletic persona and body offer people, especially black youth, 'a means of cultural and personal possibility, creativity and desire' (64). Jordan is thus broadly described as a public pedagogue for being 'a figure of estimable public moral authority whose career educates us about the convergence of productive and disenabling forms of knowledge, desire, interest, consumption and culture' (64). This emphasis on the pedagogical effect of celebrities and celebrity culture has been made in similar discussions elsewhere, on cases such as Al Gore's and Leonardo DiCaprio's political advocacy that provokes public deliberations about climate change (Doyle et al. 2017), celebrity chefs like Jamie Oliver, whose voices offer to intervene and cultivate moral values of health, food consumption and citizenship (Gray et al. 2017), and Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and fellow popular musicians, whose cultural works not only engender and impart thoughts intellectually and affectively (Gershon 2010) but also inspire and empower the mass to critique, protest and bring about social change (Haycock 2015).

It is important that the potential and capacity celebrities may have to influence or educate the public are understood from two distinct and related perspectives. They need to be situated within debates about public pedagogy, which regards the role of popular culture and media as sites of learning and pedagogical work (Giroux 2001, 2004), where celebrities are seen actively engaged in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of fans, followers and the wider public. On the other hand, such embodied or discursive practices of influencing have much to do with the commodification of celebrity culture propelled by digital technology, social media and the neoliberal logic of authenticity and self-presentation. It is from these two perspectives and interacting processes that we are able to critically assess the means and ends of celebrity performances and influences and the underlying structures and forces at work.

Celebrity culture as public pedagogy

The notion of public pedagogy has developed in recognition that learning takes place well beyond the formalized education settings and, as such, pedagogy is at work across a spectrum of social practices and settings. Diverse cultural sites, therefore, also serve as pedagogical sites on which cultural texts and practices function as a form of public pedagogy 'in the formation of social identities, the popular cultural imaginary, and "popular" knowledges' (Luke and Luke

1997: 46). As Giroux (2004: 62) argues, 'pedagogy is central to any viable notion of cultural politics and that cultural studies is crucial to any viable notion of pedagogy.' Giroux's thesis to crosslink critical pedagogy with cultural studies has fundamentally debunked the conventional, narrow perception of learning, and placed cultural pedagogy firmly on the agenda in which popular culture is reconstituted as something both entertaining and 'serious'. As Weiner (2001: 434, emphasis in original) asserts,

> popular culture is one of society's most effective devices for categorising our affective and thinking capacities, teaching as it entertains and entertaining as it teaches. The relationship between entertainment and educational capacity suggests that […] popular cultural media are as pedagogically effective as they are *because* they entertain.

It is precisely because of its cultural politics of entertainment, which normalizes representations so that they appear correct or commonsensical to us and, thus, limit our ability to question beyond their implied assumptions about the society, that popular culture is understood to have serious capacities for public pedagogy and learning.

Popular culture as public pedagogy has been explored to expose normalization and reproduction of the dominant social order as well as potentials for counter-hegemonic resistance and transformation (Ellsworth 2005; Sandlin et al. 2010; Rich 2011). As Giroux (2008: 8) reminds us, the media by means of which public pedagogy is enacted 'have to be critically engaged within the social anxieties and consumptions that prompted their production and their circulation as public texts in the first place'.

It is argued that celebrity culture contributes to a unique form of public pedagogy that 'is marked by spectacle of desire, consumption and profiteering' (Gray et al. 2017: 71). It feeds into the neoliberal public pedagogy which, according to Giroux (2005: 13), constitutes 'a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain'. As studies show (Gray et al. 2017; Duvall and Heckemeyer 2018; Marston 2019; Wilson 2011), celebrities are capable of mobilizing various resources, templates and stakeholders and harnessing particular pedagogical forces for producing or enacting certain public discourses that they align with.

Influencer pedagogy on social media

Reid (2010), among others, observes that social media have expanded the cultural-material foundations and opportunities for pedagogues to intervene in public pedagogy while also shaping the changing possibilities of cultural discourse. For internet celebrities, this is essentially about how to engage with the attention economy and visibility labour practices using social media platforms on the new landscape (Abidin 2018), and how to embed forms of promotion, support and attention-attracting of self in a specific constellation of cultural values and interpretations.

In this light, the labour of celebrity pedagogy online seems akin to that of influencers who 'accumulate a following on blogs and social media through textual and visual narrations of their personal, everyday lives, upon which advertorials for products and services are premised' (Abidin 2018: 86). Craig (2022: 63) characterizes this labour as a form of entrepreneurship, in the sense that the content creators have the 'ability to harness platforms to aggregate and engage online communities of interest, which they convert into varying forms of cultural and commercial value'. Following these scholars, the consideration of the pedagogical function of internet celebrities is not only relevant, but invites us to look into, among various other issues, how most of them perform a pedagogical role by projecting an online persona as influencers. This, in essence, involves constructing a personal status of authority as 'thought leaders' with (perceived) expertise in a given domain that appeals to the crowds and creates or changes trends on social networks, which is widely observed in public health, fashion market, beauty industry, environmental campaigns and elsewhere, but less so in language learning.

Language influencers and Chinese learning

By 'language influencers', we take stock of the above discussion on internet celebrity culture and its potential for public pedagogy and underscore the emerging trend of commodifying personal skills and opinions of language(s) and associated culture(s) in the online attention economy. We see this trend premised on both the Bourdieuian perspective of language as symbolic capital that adds to cultural authenticity and social mobility, and the viewpoint on celebrity capital for marketing the 'authentic' self as public persona (Driessen 2013; Couldry 2016). If, to borrow from Thompson (2022), the labour of social media influencers can be generally characterized by features of authenticity, interactivity, multimodality and visuality,

what makes language influencers immediately distinguishable would arguably be their work to 'sell' and to educate the public with their linguistic and cultural identities. Such work is built around the self-publicizing of their language profile as successful polyglots, often authenticated by enacting live interactions using native-like linguistic skills and narrating personal experiences, and, alongside these, their authoritative views and beliefs about the language and culture and how to engage with the learning of these. The authenticity of language influencers is semiotically invoked, at least in part, by their display of advanced knowledge of a specific language and embodied personal philosophy and ideology about the language, its use and its learning. For them, these constitute crucial pedagogical devices.

Although a number of studies examined the ways in which social media can stimulate and facilitate the informal learning of foreign languages (Mondahl and Razmerita 2014) or minority languages (Jones 2015), few have looked into the phenomenon of language influencers and the kind of public pedagogy they produce on social media. This article calls for attention to language influencers as an emerging part of popular culture and social media studies and sets to gain a preliminary understanding of the ways they disseminate pedagogical discourses. For language influencers of Chinese – as we will see next in the case of MYBY, these conditions further accentuate the sense of authenticity that is conveyed and disseminated through their extraordinary skills of language use and personalized 'proven' ideologies in the Chinese language and approaches to its learning – all constitute important public pedagogical discourses.

MYBY as pedagogues of Chinese learning on social media

Because of their rise to celebrity from popular Chinese media as foreign speakers of Chinese, MW and BS are also well-known and influential on social media. This is reflected in the number of subscribers and viewership they have attracted, as stated earlier. One striking feature of MYBY is that its videos are mostly made indoors, in which the duo holds seemingly unscripted discussions for at least ten minutes on topics related to foreign language learning and the difference between Chinese and Anglophone worlds. The conversations are conducted primarily in Chinese, while English is sporadically used, and bilingual subtitles are provided. This 'talk-show' format draws viewers' attention to their in-depth knowledge about and native-like fluency in Chinese, through which they effectively establish their public persona as

successful learners and, hence, convincingly assume the pedagogical role of advising other internet users on acquiring Chinese and understanding its linguaculture.

While MYBY has published over 160 videos between 2016 and 2020,[2] we analyse five of these in which MW and BS focus exclusively on discussing foreigners' learning and use of Chinese. These include three videos commenting on and evaluating the Chinese pronunciation of some 'Western' celebrities – mainly American singers and actors (MYBY 2017a; 2017b; 2017c), one video comparing the Chinese accents of foreign speakers from different countries (MYBY 2018), and, additionally, one video entitled 'Our special tricks & tips to learning a foreign language' (MYBY 2019) in which MW and BS explicitly advise, if not preach, their viewers how to master the language as they have done.

We will conduct a critical multimodal discourse analysis of the chosen examples, adapting Thurlow's analytic framework (2017a; 2017b), which studies language use in digital discourse as (1) a 'metadiscursive resource' that is embedded in the socio-cultural perception of and ideologies attached to language use; (2) 'metrolingual resource' in which linguistic resources of different languages are creatively mixed and matched; (3) as a 'multimodal resource' that involves both verbal and visual modes of communication, and (4) a 'technologizing resource' for one to publicly stage participation and interaction on social media. By examining the MYBY videos from these perspectives, this article investigates how language, media and semiotic ideologies are intersected in the digital discourses produced by these two TV-personality-turned-YouTubers. It scrutinizes the semiotic devices in the videos, such as their speech in different accents of Chinese and English, as well as captions that mix Chinese characters and English script, Chinese pinyin, emoticons, non-standard written forms, and so on. From these, we can understand, first, how MW and BS use verbal and visual signs to perform and foreground their own persona as model foreign speakers of Chinese to the audiences and, second, the pedagogy implied in their multimodal discourses of language ideology, such as the definition of correct/good Chinese, the criteria of appropriate learning strategies and the hierarchical dichotomy between native and non-native speakers. We discuss these in detail below.

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[2] MYBY stopped updating in mid-2020 due to Covid-19 and Wiley's return to America. The two began to work on their own social media channels respectively. Wiley now produces Chinese-language content on YouTube, which is also uploaded to his personal Weibo.

Defining the norm of 'good' Chinese

A distinctive line we can observe from the videos is how MW and BS disseminate their definition of 'correct' and 'good' Chinese, particularly by commenting on and ridiculing the pronunciation of other foreign speakers. Reacting to the clips of American celebrities speaking and singing in Chinese (MYBY 2017a; 2017b; 2017c), the two YouTubers appear astounded and baffled by the poor performances. Visual effects such as emoticons (faces with open mouths and cold sweat) and huge on-screen texts ('what?' and 'embarrassing' in huge font sizes) are used to magnify their disapproval. The 'bad' examples are used by MW and BS to not only make fun of the speakers but also to identify and analyse the 'mistakes' made by those foreign speakers and advise the viewers on how to avoid them.

In doing so, MW and BS particularly scrutinize the tone errors made by other foreign speakers in exhaustive detail. Their commentaries on Morgan Freeman and Marc Ruffalo speaking Chinese in the movie *Now You See Me 2* serve as a good example (MYBY 2017b, 0'35-0'53):

	Chinese subtitles	English subtitles	On-screen captions
1	MW: 你的普通 huaaa	If your mandarinnnn	你的普通花
2	BS: 我会跟你 jiaaang	I will tell youuuu	会跟你僵
3	MW: 有一点泰国的那种感觉	Got a touch of Thai flavour to it	斯瓦迪 Hey girl (with a picture of a woman in traditional Thai dress)
4	MW: 你的普通花	Your Normal Flower	
5	BS: 普通花~	Mandarinnnn	
	[...]		
6	BS: 我觉得呃..说得还不错但是声调	I think...it's not terrible, but the tones are off	
7	BS: "见过他们吗"	"Cashew them before"	坚果他们吗？
8	MW: "花"	"Flower"	

Table 1: A sample juxtaposition of the Chinese subtitles, English subtitles, and on-screen captions from commentaries on *Now You See Me 2* by MW and BS

The excerpted conversation shows how MW and BS playfully imitate the actors speaking 'bad' Chinese: '你的普通话' (your Mandarin) [nǐ de pǔ tōng huà] (lines 1, 4, 5, 8), '我会跟你讲' (I will tell you) [wǒ huì gēn nǐ jiǎng] (line 2) and '见过他们吗' (have you seen them?) [jiàn guò

tā mén má] (line 7). Instead of indicating the original lines, the captions and subtitles, which disregard the orthographic rules and sometimes do not make any literal sense, only reproduce the sound. They multimodally illustrate the flaws in the actors' performed Chinese. For example, as Ruffalo in the movie articulates the fourth-tone character 话 [huà] (in the word 普通话) in the first tone, the video indicates the Chinese character 花 [huā], which means flower, to show that the tiny mistake in tone will change the meaning of the original word from 'common speech', namely, the standard Chinese, to 'common flower'. Meanwhile, as the first tone is high and flat, the spelling of 'huaaaa' (line 1) and 'Mandarinnnn', together with the symbol '~' (line 5) are also used to show how Ruffalo's pronunciation deviates from the correct, sharp falling fourth tone. Similarly, as Ruffalo says the third-tone 讲 [jiǎng] in the first tone, the video mobilizes the deliberately misspelt pinyin 'jiaaang' and, 僵 [jiāng], a first-tone character with the same pinyin, to visualize the wrong tone. The English subtitle also spells 'you' as 'youuuu' to direct viewers' attention to the flat tone that should not be there. Likewise, the video subtitles Morgan Freeman's line of 'have you seen them?' as 'have you cashew them before', accentuating that his pronunciation of 见过 (have seen) [jiàn guò] is in the wrong tones and has thus been turned into 坚果 (nuts) [jiān guǒ].

In addition, MW and BS assess the Hollywood actors' Chinese by their intonation and cadence. For example, they conclude that the Chinese spoken by Keanu Reeves (MYBY 2017a) and Vincent D'Onofrio (MYBY 2017b) in films are 'so-so'. Even though their pronunciation is relatively accurate, they speak too slowly and robotically, and fail to make pauses at the right places, such as for commas and periods. They also point out that unnecessary stress adversely affects the speakers' overall fluency. For instance, when BS says the sentence '你对他们' (you to them) [nǐ duì tā mén] by imitating Reeves' intonation, the English subtitle writes 'This is you DUI them' to underline the fact that his stress on the character 对 [duì] is eccentric and distracting (MYBY 2017a).

Furthermore, drawing on their observation of Hollywood celebrities and their personal friends, MW and BS are keen on categorizing learners of Chinese from different countries. For example, as shown above, they describe Marc Ruffalo's Chinese in *Now You See Me 2* as being 'Thai flavour', suggesting that the way he stretches and raises the pitch of the end of the sentence resembles a stereotypical Thai accent. They also extensively characterize and stereotype the American and British speakers of Chinese:

American	● Some American girls are 'super coy', that is, trying to be cute and shaking their heads when they speak Chinese (MYBY 2017a). ● The Americans are 'very confident' when speaking and hence, they easily 'go over the top' and ignore the tones (MYBY 2018). ● The Americans like to draw out the length of certain words (MYBY 2018). ● The Americans do not differentiate the first, second and third tones. But whenever they speak the fourth tone, they put an exaggerated and dramatic stress on the sharp, falling sound as if they are shouting (MYBY 2018). For example, Wiley's mother can only pronounce the Chinese greeting 你好 [ní hǎo] like 'knee how' in English (MYBY 2018).
British	● The British speak Chinese in a relatively flat tone, like British English is flatter and softer than American English (MYBY 2018) ● The British cannot differentiate the Chinese consonants x, z, and q. For instance, Theresa May pronounced Xi Jinping as 'She' Jinping (MYBY 2018).

Table 2: A summary of the stereotypical features of American and British speakers of Chinese by MW and BS.

By looking at how they assess the Chinese spoken by Hollywood celebrities and by their personal friends, we can see MW and BS disseminating their definition of how 'normal' Chinese should sound. Using a range of examples, they draw particular attention to pronunciation and accents. While the misarticulation of a tone resulting in the production of a different word or nonword is generally regarded as an error, speaking Chinese in a distinctive pitch and intonation is not; there is no one 'correct' accent after all. However, MW and BS always discuss both types of issues together when they mock the 'faulty' Chinese delivered by foreigners. For example, as shown in Table 2, MW suggests that both mispronouncing tones (error) and putting excessive stress on tones (accent) are the 'problems' of American speakers of Chinese. These heighten the perception that being a successful learner is to speak not only accurately but also 'naturally', namely, to sound like a native.

In addition to pronunciation, MW and BS highlight that one can be more native-like by using 'idiomatic' Chinese, particularly slang and vernacular phrases. BS tells the viewers that it is more important to learn to speak 'authentic' (地道) than merely 'fluent' (流利) Chinese (MYBY 2019). He illustrates that, although he learnt how to enunciate 'I am happy today' (我今天很高兴), only after arriving in Beijing did he realize that local people express the same feeling by saying 'Wooo, I'm happy as f**k today~' (哎呀妈呀 高兴死啦 今天) with a strong Beijing accent. He also comments that some foreigners use too many idioms when speaking

Chinese, partly to show off their knowledge, but which, in fact, is weird from the perspective of native speakers. These examples on the choice of expressions reinforce the argument that classroom or textbook knowledge is insufficient for one to become a successful learner of Chinese, who should not only speak the language accurately but also naturally, as if a native.

The emphasis on the 'native' norms of pronunciation and choice of words permeates the pedagogical discourses in the videos. On the one hand, after commenting on the examples of 'funny' errors and accents,[3] they often proceed by offering advice on how to 'sound more like a native speaker' (MYBY 2018). On the other hand, most of their tips on learning Chinese suggest that one should immerse oneself in a native-speaking environment. They argue that even if one cannot live in China, one should make Chinese friends and watch Chinese reality shows, from which one can observe and imitate the 'authentic' Chinese, especially slang used by the locals 'on the street' (MYBY 2019).

For advice on learning 'authentic' Chinese, MW and BS draw on their own struggles to become native-like when they were beginners. Their reviews of the spoken Chinese performed by Hollywood stars are followed by reflections on how they used to make the same kind of mistakes when they were beginners. For instance, after dramatically parodying Eric Bana's mispronunciation of the word '不要' [bú yào] (I don't want) as '不搖' [bù yáo] (I don't shake), MW states that Bana 'has the same problem a lot of foreigners do, myself included, that when we get excited our tones go crazy' (MYBY 2017b). By saying 'myself included', MW forges a sense of intimacy with the audience by suggesting that he has gone through the same difficulties most foreign learners do. It invites the viewers to identify their learning experience with the two YouTubers and aspire to the prospect that, by following the advice given in the videos, they too can overcome their 'foreignness' and speak native-like Chinese. Thus, MW and BS, while laughing at the others, frequently recall the embarrassing mistakes they made in their first years living in China.

We should note that the 'native sound' standard they uphold in the videos exclusively refers to Putonghua, which, based on the Mandarin Chinese spoken in Beijing, was standardized by the Chinese government as the official language in the 1950s. Nonetheless,

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[3] Their 2018 video discusses accents from different countries. Its Chinese title 'People from which country speak the funniest accent?', however, indicates a perception that foreign accents are abnormal, hilarious and that learners should try to get rid of their own accents.

many Chinese people still use dialects as their first language and have a regional accent when speaking Putonghua. The term 'regional Putonghua' describes the non-standard varieties of Putonghua that have their respective lexical, grammatical and phonetic features (Zhao and Liu 2021). Although regional varieties of Putonghua have been socially stereotyped under the state's monolingual policies, its visibility in the mass media and on the internet in recent years, as Zhao and Liu (2021) observe, is destabilizing state monolingualism. Meanwhile, the concept of 'World Chineses' (borrowed from 'World Englishes') also emerges to recognize the varieties of Mandarin Chinese used in the mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and other overseas Chinese communities (Lin et al. 2019). However, as shown above, the MYBY videos persistently refer to the standard variety of Putonghua as the 'native' Chinese that learners should aim to achieve. For example, MW suspects that many Hollywood stars performed their Chinese lines poorly because their teachers might be Cantonese speakers (or, in his original words in Chinese, 'people from Guangdong province', see MYBY 2017a), who constitute a large diasporic community in America. He also goes on to say that, back in his hometown in Kentucky, when he tried to find a native speaker in a Chinese restaurant to talk to, he was disappointed that the waiter was from Fujian. He also imitates the accent of the waiter by pronouncing Fujian as 胡建 [hújiàn]. It is also noted that when they praise someone's Chinese proficiency as 'very good' or 'amazing' (as shown in the English subtitles of the videos), they commonly use the Chinese word 标准, which literally means 'standard' (MYBY 2017a; 2017b; 2018). These examples indicate that the discourses of Chinese learning expressed on MYBY reinforce the Standard Language Ideology, a belief that a form of language (in this case, the state-sanctioned standard variety of Putonghua) is the most correct, legitimate and thus superior one (Walsh 2021; Zhao and Liu 2021).

Remapping the boundaries between native and non-native speakers

The normalizing discourses of speaking and learning Chinese as a foreign language in the MYBY videos, as seen above, revolve around a constructed hierarchy between native and non-native speakers; the latter are supposed to remove the 'foreignness' in their speech and mirror the sounds produced by the former. Nonetheless, MW and BS at times situate themselves beyond the native/non-native binary, a concept heavily challenged in the field of applied English linguistics (Phillipson 1992; Braine 1999) and, hence, destabilize it in the context of

Chinese language and culture. Their self-presented image as successful learners suggests that the intrinsic superiority of native speakers is not perpetual, since there is a high and realistic chance for foreign speakers of Chinese to achieve a native-like level of competence. They assure their audiences that modern Chinese is 'easy' or 'not that hard', exemplified when BS leans back and shrugs in a video saying that 'in Chinese [the word order is] just like whatever' (MYBY 2019), referring to the fact that Chinese has much more flexible grammatical rules than other 'difficult' languages they know, like Russian and German.

In this sense, MW and BS are critical of the view that denies the possibility that non-natives Chinese speakers can attain the same level of knowledge as native speakers. In the video about language-learning tips (MYBY 2019), they express annoyance about the fact that the locals they met in China are used to testing and educating foreigners about Chinese linguaculture with arrogance. They re-enact how local Chinese ask foreigners whether they know traditional Chinese expressions (such as idioms and two-part allegorical sayings) as well as classical Chinese philosophers (such as Confucius and Mencius) and poets (such as Li Bai). MW adds that they will keep asking until they find the chance to say, 'let me tell you, China has 5000 years~ There is so much to learn~ A foreigner could never learn all of it~' (MYBY 2019). By mimicking the locals' disapproving finger-shaking toward them while making such comments, MW and BS jokingly mock and challenge the attitude that foreigners can never pass all the 'language tests' invented by native speakers. The two further analyse the behaviours of these native-speaking Chinese people and argue that, since they proudly regard Chinese as the oldest and hardest language in the world, they want to prove this 'false' belief by probing and lecturing the perplexed foreign learners. The two also recount that they themselves often pretend that they do not know the answers in order to meet such 'expectations' and end such conversations. The critical and sarcastic remarks allow them to challenge the presumed superiority of 'native' standards and to resist the fixed position of 'non-native' speakers, in which foreigners such as themselves are subjected to relentless scrutiny and evaluation from the native speakers.

Nonetheless, even if it appears to be self-contradictory, the MYBY videos are also critical of foreigners who are overly confident about their proficiency and forget their role as a learner. We can find this message throughout the video about language-learning tips, for example (MYBY 2019, 0'20-0'28; 7'40-8'39, original English subtitles):

MW: I'm not the type of foreigner in China that say: 'Yeah my Chinese is f**king mind-blowing, so fluent~' Not me at all.

BS (impersonating that type of foreigner): 'I speak really good'

MW: No no no, not us. […]

MW: We've been in China for quite a while and I think our Chinese level is pretty solid. But you end up seeing a lot of people that have only studied Chinese for half a year to a year or spent a semester abroad in China write on their resumes: fluent in Mandarin Chinese. […]

MW (impersonating that type of foreigner): 'Oh me too. I was at Peking University for a semester. Yeah it's a pretty tough language but, you know, I worked hard'

BS: And you just stay silent.

MW: (I responded by saying) 'Yeah, Ok cool.' And then they speak Chinese: 'So I think it's not easy for someone to speak on my level' […] There are so many people that do this kind of nonsense.

BS: I also have encountered this type of situation before. There was a girl that spent some time in Beijing. We met at a party. There was a Chinese person there and the girl was telling him: 'Yeah, I studied in Beijing. I spent some time there. I really like to speak Chinese.' Later she heard me speak a bit of Chinese and then she looks at me and goes: 'I knew it. I knew your Chinese was better than mine!'

By criticizing some learners for being unabashedly complacent, MW and BS advise that one should not 'brag too much about yourself' (MYBY 2019) when you are, in fact, not good enough. Although they claim that their Chinese is 'just ok', they often use themselves as a benchmark when judging whether one is eligible to claim they speak good Chinese. For example, they are specifically scornful of those self-proclaimed fluent speakers who study/stay in China for a much shorter period than they did, and how these people are surprised and embarrassed after finding that MW and BS speak much better Chinese than they do. When they bring out the Chinese cultural message about modesty that one should be 'very, very humble'

when learning a language, they also use themselves as an example, as MW says that '*even I am still reading flashcards to memorize vocabulary every morning*' (MYBY 2019).

On the other hand, MW and BS impersonate self-satisfied learners by speaking in a strong non-standard accent. For example, BS mocks that they pronounce 'very well' as 'hin~hiao~' (shown in the Chinese caption) instead of the correct pronunciation hénhǎo (很好) when claiming they speak Chinese 'very well'. Similarly, MW deliberately pronounces 'not easy' jiǎndān (简单) as jiandian when he recaps what 'that type of foreigners' would often say. From these, the YouTubers suggest that a learner could call oneself a good Chinese speaker only after mastering a standard, native-like accent.

In the videos that review Hollywood celebrities' performances in Chinese (MYBY 2017a, 2017b), MW and BS give high marks to a few of the actors despite their mispronunciation and non-standard accents. But they always explain that those mistakes can be forgiven since the actors are 'professional translators' and sometimes only speak the Chinese lines on set for comedic/dramatic effects (MYBY 2017b). Nonetheless, for those actors who are known to have learnt Chinese in their off-screen lives, according to MW and BS, they should do better than those who just learnt on the filming sets (MYBY 2017a, 2017b). It shows how they educate the viewers that serious learners of Chinese should be evaluated and evaluate themselves from a native perspective and take the learning seriously.

Thus, MW and BS discursively create a space in between and beyond the native/non-native binary instead of completely deconstructing it. In the opening of their video on language-learning tips, they state in Chinese that they make this video because many viewers comment on their language skills: 'OMG, these two foreigners speak really good Chinese! Not Bad!' (MYBY 2019). The quote shows how the two YouTubers introduce their legitimacy as someone who can give advice on Chinese learning through the recognition of local, native Chinese. Given that, as argued above, they insist that only native-like Chinese is considered 'good' Chinese, we can see how the MYBY videos, in many ways, reinforce the superiority of native speakers over non-native speakers. Even when they criticize the superiority complex of native speakers, in fact, they suggest that one is only eligible to complain if they have achieved native-like proficiency. For example, they emphasize that they did not answer some native people's difficult questions about the Chinese language only because they did not bother to (instead of not knowing the answers) (MYBY 2019). Similarly, in response to Chinese speakers

who like to test foreigners' knowledge about Chinese idioms, the YouTubers not only indicate that they have a good understanding of them, but also remind the viewer that the overuse of idioms in everyday conversation is awkward (MYBY 2019). On the other hand, they say that they hope Chinese viewers will not nitpick and magnify their spelling and grammatical mistakes, since even native speakers of all languages often make careless errors and typos (MYBY 2019). The message from MW and BS here is that they are high-achieving non-natives who can use the language like natives and, therefore, can confidently dismiss and reject native speakers' stereotypes and scrutiny. They, however, are not persuading native speakers to be open-minded and receptive to the mistakes committed or the varieties of accents spoken by foreign speakers and learners.

Conclusion

We have used the case of Martin Wiley Woods and Blair Sugarman and their YouTube channel MYBY to illustrate an important and critical dimension of popular culture. That is, the culture of internet celebrities, in this case, language influencers, offers noteworthy space for public learning and pedagogy. This specific genre of popular culture combines celebrity status and its entertainment nature with YouTube, jointly affording the online activities of MW and BS – two highly competent speakers of Chinese – great potential to construct and circulate their vernacular discourses about the learning of Chinese language and culture. Such discourses can be described as pedagogical in terms of both the linguistic performance and the (meta)cultural messages about language standards, learning approaches and speakerhood embedded in their Chinese-speaking 'talk-show' videos.

The vernacular discourses of pedagogy by MW and BS, importantly, are neither banal nor benign. With Chinese continuing to rise as a global language, the number of 'native-like' foreign speakers that can convincingly achieve a certain celebrity status based on their advanced Chinese skills is growing, but nonetheless, they are still relatively rare. Next to this is the fact that social media production of anything to do with Chinese learning is overwhelmingly about 'formal' pedagogy, namely, the explicit and structured teaching of the language and culture mirroring a classroom-based or curriculum-based context. This, therefore, makes MYBY stand out as a 'spectacular' novelty of considerable entertainment as well as educational value in the public sphere. Meanwhile, as we have seen in the relevant videos they

made, the linguistic features that MW and BS use and the ideas they convey through the language are imbued with a cultural politics centring on the normativity of the Chinese language and its speakerhood.

As we have seen, MW and BS align firmly with the native and standardized norms of Chinese Putonghua. Considering that millions of Chinese still struggle with Putonghua (China Daily 2013), their flamboyant display of an outstanding command of the variety as foreign speakers sets MW and BS apart not only as role models to fellow learners and foreign speakers, but also as active promoters of the norms to the public by embodying these norms in their own acts of speaking. The emphasis is interwoven with their language ideology beyond the linguistic variety, on features such as accent, tones and register, to further affirm what is widely believed to be the most 'authentic, mastery level' Chinese. They do so, for instance, by dismantling in detail other non-native accents and by repeatedly accentuating the vernacular 'street' expressions they have picked up locally in China over the standard textbook lines most learners can only access. Displaying and sharing knowledge of these features, or more exclusive norms, is deployed by MW and BS to project a self-image of 'language experts', based on which they then authenticate what they have to say to the audience about strategies of learning. In this latter respect, they also subtly align with the normative discourse about language learning often found in the mainstream formal learning context, offering tips such as using flashcards, participating in performance, rote learning by recording and writing, meeting language buddies and so on. This includes what they demonstrate as an internalized cultural and moral value of being modest, which they argue is of equal if not more importance than the linguistic skills themselves. In short, MW and BS observably uphold the native, normative discourses about the language and its learning to legitimize their status as both 'language experts' and 'learning experts' of Chinese.

On the other hand, and paradoxically, MW and BS are also seen transgressing the native versus non-native dichotomy. This is illustrated by the fact that, in constructing a discourse of 'expert' about themselves, they tactfully erect themselves as role models and, even more, as the benchmark or the placeholder for native speakers by contrasting themselves with all kinds of other foreign speakers. This, we could argue, is a discursive manoeuvre that attempts to blur the hard, raciolinguistic boundaries between 'native' and 'non-native'. Moreover, MW and BS show that they explicitly mock and reject the 'language test' set by the native speakers, such as the testing of their knowledge of classical Chinese language and culture in daily encounters.

Their carnivalesque enactment of the type of conversations between themselves and a pseudo-native speaker challenges 'the Chinese assumption' that a foreigner could never learn everything about China's linguaculture, which, as discussed, BS criticizes as a 'condescending attitude'. Instead, they draw on learning experiences and knowledge they have had from another 'difficult' languages, such as Russian, German and French, or even, as native speakers of English who are rightfully entitled to offer advice to Chinese learners, to recall attention to their impressive language repertoire and skills which native speakers of Chinese have little exposure to or success in. These, therefore, provide evidence that MW and BS dissent from the native norms about 'authentic' speakerhood of Chinese while reasserting and revalidating their 'expert' status from the perspective of the raciolinguistic Other.

In light of what we have observed about the case of MYBY, we conclude that while internet language pedagogues strive for self-branding and the commodification of authenticity by means of native-like language skills, they can potentially reshape the landscape of learning foreign languages and cultures. This may take place at both the content level, in terms of the linguistic items and features advocated by the celebrities, and the ideological level, in terms of what they believe about how to learn and by whose standards. What MYBY highlights, in particular, is the normativity surrounding speakerhood in Chinese, which sees MW and BS embracing the native-speaker linguistic norms while largely dismissing the cultural norms set to gatekeep the native/non-native boundaries. The pedagogical effect of these two seemingly conflicting discourses is that, for MW and BS, they have, through their agency, potentially enclaved (in the sense of Homi Bhabha) a third space in which they, as foreign speakers in the conventional sense, can claim an alternative speakerhood of Chinese. More importantly, by utilizing their celebrity potential on social media – consciously or unconsciously – the reach of the influence is beyond their videos as popular cultural texts per se. In this direction, further exploration of how their pedagogical discourses are received and interpreted is needed for future studies.

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