

Voice of China on the move



It's a weeknight at the Sydney Town Hall, an ornate 19th century building in the city centre. Almost everyone bustling in the entryway is of Chinese extraction, except the ushers (and me). They're all ages, and as I pour inside with them I hear Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka, and a little English. There are posters and flyers using simplified and traditional Chinese characters alongside English text. These scripts are not in-text translations but code-switching sentences working together within each ad to sell Australian Ugg boots or New Zealand throat lozenges. The ticket I hold and the banners on stage are also multilingual. They read "*The Voice of China* 中国好声音 澳大利亚招募站 Season 4 Australia Audition". The tickets were free and 'sold out' days before this event. It's the final audition – in a live concert format – for the upcoming season of a popular reality TV franchise, based on 'Voice of Holland', and available on a subscription channel in Australia. This is the first season of 'Voice of China' in which 'Overseas Chinese' can compete for the chance to be 'The Australian Contender' and flown to mainland China to film the series.

In-Group, Ethnicity and Language

The Town Hall this night is clearly a space where people operate within "multi-sited transnational social fields encompassing those who leave and those who stay behind", as Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2004, p. 1003) have put it. These sociologists posit that migrants may simultaneously assimilate into a host society and maintain enduring ties to those sharing their ethnic identity, "pivoting" between the two. This is a useful lens through which to regard the event. What is most interesting with 'Voice of China' is the use of language to extend who counts as "those who leave". The contestants have not necessarily actually left China, many are originally from Australia. Maybe their parents, or even their grandparents, once migrated. The audition's winner [SPOILER ALERT!] is one of the few contestants without a Chinese first name: Leon Lee, a university music student from Sydney.

As these contestants pivot towards China – particularly through their use of Putonghua-Mandarin – so too does the Chinese community pivot towards the diaspora through the vehicle of this show, both by holding these Australian auditions at all and by incorporating Cantonese and Australian English. Together, the singers, hosts, judges and audience are constructing a transnational social field that incorporates both Australia and China; Sydney is not simply a city in Australia but an Asian migration hub located in reference to Beijing. All the fans

sitting around me, who might watch other 'Voice of China' events in virtual spaces – online and on international pay TV – while living in Sydney, demonstrate the layers of place in one geographic space.

The use of language also reveals interesting dynamics in who counts as having a shared ethnic identity. In an adjustment invisible to the audience, one contestant did not perform in his first language, the Kam-Tai language Zhuang, which is an official ethnic minority language in China. The show's producers had said he could choose only English, Mandarin or Cantonese songs.

There is a normative equivalence of language and ethnicity being reproduced here. The way in which language features associated with Mandarin, Cantonese and Chinese minority languages "index" (Blommaert and Rampton 2011) Chinese-ness (or do not index it) is shown to be more complicated as the auditions unfurl. It is a linguistic manifestation of a recurrent normative tension over what features are identified with the *Zhonghua Minzu*. On one hand, Chinese minority languages and common Chinese-heritage dialects in Australia such as Hokkien and Hakka are totally absent from stage. On the other, Cantonese, although it is officially deemed a dialect not a minority language, is used by the hosts, contestants and judges. Despite Cantonese's status, until recently it, rather than Mandarin, was the language identified as "Chinese" in Australia. Cantonese is also the Chinese language historically strongest in Hong Kong, and after all it's a Hong Kong station (TVB) organising and presenting these auditions. Cantonese is given equivalent official status in the Town Hall show, with hosting duties meticulously shared between a Mandarin speaking man and a Cantonese-speaking woman.

But there's still an observable norm of language dominance. When Jessica and Deborah Kwong, two Melbourne sisters, use Cantonese to introduce themselves in their pre-recorded video, then sing a live duet in English, a judge doesn't hesitate to give all his feedback in Mandarin. They nod as he speaks. It's only when the next judge takes his turn that the girls ask to switch to "*Guangdonghua*" (Guangdong Speech, a colloquial name for Cantonese) that we all realise the sisters didn't understand the first judge. There's laughter all round, and the judges pledge to ask all future contestants which language they'd prefer. For all the deliberate announcements in Cantonese, *not* being fluent in Mandarin is not 'normal' in this context.

Leon Lee sings a lovely, English-language mash-up of rap, R&B and John Lennon's *Yesterday*, ending with a modest *xiexie* ('thank you' in Mandarin). True to their recent pledge, the judges ask if they can comment in Mandarin. Leon explains – in Mandarin – that he speaks it imperfectly but understands it, and the judges proceed.

Only one contestant sings in Cantonese in the round, although many more speak Cantonese in their videos. Their practice again reveals the language expected by 'Voice of China's mainland producers and viewers. (While a Hong Kong station produces the auditions, it's a mainland Chinese station, ZJTV, that produces and airs the series.) Sydney, being oriented to China but not actually in China, is a space where different linguistic norms can apply and so we get a slightly uncomfortable, simultaneous centralization and marginalization of Cantonese.

Translocal and Global

In addition to the associations between language and Chinese identity, tonight's language practices happen under conditions of globalization. The singers at once use features associated with American English to link to the global scripts of reality TV song contests, and Australian-accented English to localize themselves. Their use

of Mandarin can be understood as an additional attempt to localize, to differentiate from the global English language, global pop culture and global TV media.

Some contestants take on American accents in singing English-language songs, including Gaga's *Paparazzi*, or employ the style of Anglo Pop music by inserting "yeah yeah yeah" into Mandarin songs. The judges also use features associated with American English – "Dude, your range is incredible," says one judge – which functions to harmonise the show with the "international" American style of reality TV. However, when the contestants speak English to thank the crowd, they have unabashed Australian accents.

The contestant I've come to support, Wei Baocheng, linguistically localises in a different way. He makes his rendition of 'The Sound of Silence' more Australian than the American original not through accent but through prosody in his laconic rendition. The judges employ some translanguaging to describe it as "hen[很] laid back" and "hen[很] 'Strayan". *Hen* is the Mandarin word for 'very', and 'Strayan' is a jocular, colloquial term for "Australian".

Localization is also achieved through song choice, amongst other things. For example, contestant Wang Chen sings the yearning rock ballad "[Beijing, Beijing](#)", popular in China in recent years (and already on [Voice of China in 2012](#)). The pathos with which he performs it reinforces that, for him, Sydney Town Hall is oriented to China. Wang is singing about a city at the imagined heart of the community he (and the producers) imagine the audience to be.



Blommaert, J., & Rampton, B. (2011). Language and Superdiversity. *Diversities*, 13(2), 1-22.

Levitt, P., & Schiller, N. (2006). Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society1 *International Migration Review*, 38 (3), 1002-1039 DOI: [10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00227.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00227.x)