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# Space and Language Learning under the Neoliberal Economy

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Neoliberalism, as an ideology that valorizes and institutionalizes market-based freedom and individual entrepreneurship, derives from the logic of highly advanced capitalism, and thus must be understood in relation to the material conditions of our capitalist economy. One such material condition is space. However, the intersection of space and neoliberalism is yet to be explored in detail within the field of applied linguistics. This lacuna impedes our understanding of the social and geographical embeddedness of language, in particular the dialectic between language learning and political economy. The key question we address in this paper is: how are trajectories of language learning under the neoliberal economy shaped in spatial terms? Through looking at two cases—the re-invention of the countryside village of Yangshuo as the biggest English corner in China and the Korean phenomena of *jogi yubak* [early study abroad]—we argue 1) that a heightened awareness of the link between language learning, space, and mobility will allow us to explore the material constraints and inequalities of language learning with greater sensitivity, and 2) that a focus on the spatial grounding of language learning can allow applied linguistics to make a unique contribution to the critique of neoliberalism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism, as an ideology that valorizes and institutionalizes market-based freedom and individual entrepreneurship, derives from the logic of highly advanced capitalism, and thus must be understood in relation to the material conditions of our capitalist economy. One such material condition is space. The geographical grounding of neoliberalism can be seen in multiple phenomena, including shifting geopolitical relations (Wallerstein, 2004), uneven geographical development (Harvey, 2005; Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010), neoliberal restructuring of space (Harvey, 1993; Ong, 2006, 2007), translocal effects of neoliberalism (Peck & Tickell, 2002); and demographic change and politics of place (Massey, 1993). These varied spatial effects of neoliberalism also present an important theoretical perspective that complicates our understanding of education, including educational migration, gentrification and school choice, private spaces of learning, geographical differentiation, and educational inequality (Butler & Robson, 2003; Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Gulson & Symes, 2007).

However, the intersection of space and neoliberalism is yet to be explored in detail within the field of applied linguistics. This lacuna impedes our understanding of the social and geographical embeddedness of language, in particular the dialectic between language learning and political economy (cf. Block, 2013; Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012; Rampton, 1997).

The central point this paper tries to make, therefore, is that space matters. And the key question guiding our paper is: *how are trajectories of language learning under the neoliberal economy shaped in spatial terms?* Our discussion is informed by current research into language and space. Space recently has gained new significance in the field of sociolinguistics (e.g., Auer & Schmidt, 2010; Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005; Blommaert & Dong, 2010; Johnstone, 2004). Space is no longer conceptualized as a naturally-existing void that gets populated by people, things, and geographical features; rather, there is an increasing emphasis on the way space gets imbued with social meanings and organizes social lives (Gao, 2012a; Johnstone, 2004, 2010). In this sense, space and place become mutually dependent concepts, such that it is impossible to talk about one without invoking the other:

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value ... the ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition ... Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (Tuan, 1977, p. 6, as cited in Cresswell, 2004, p. 8)<sup>1</sup>

Recent work on the sociolinguistics of globalization (Blommaert, 2010), in particular, highlights how such locally constituted meanings of space become a crucial issue in the context of heightened mobility of people and languages. Increasing translocal and transnational movement of people under globalization, for instance, foregrounds how the space that they traverse is not an undifferentiated expanse but a field with gradients and boundaries in which different locations carry different meanings for those on the move; this is due to multiple forces but, most importantly for our purposes, that of language:

The movement of people across space is therefore never a move across empty spaces. The spaces are always someone’s space, and they are filled with norms, expectations, conceptions of what counts as proper and normal (indexical) language use and what does not. Mobility, sociolinguistically speaking, is therefore a trajectory through different spaces – stratified, controlled, and monitored ones– in which language ‘gives you away.’ (Blommaert & Dong, 2010, p. 368)

In other words, the indexicality of language—the different social meaning attributed to different language varieties and ways of speaking—serves as a semiotic resource through which spatial difference is constructed and through which mobility may be facilitated or restricted (Park, 2014). Such observations have become more prominent under the current

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<sup>1</sup> Our purpose of providing the definition of space and place (pp.1-2) is to highlight that space is not a purely geographical concept but endowed with social meanings due to human activity. ‘Location’ and ‘landscape’ are mentioned below in the article in the same sense as in everyday interactions, the former referring to a point (e.g. 1°17’N 103°50’E, Singapore) in physical space, the latter being the visual (in a physical and metaphorical sense) conceptualization of a certain place and its quality.

conditions of globalization and point out the close relationship between language and the social structuring of space.

Here, we want to extend this insight further by asking how neoliberalism, which pushes the logic of capitalism to its extremes, puts a further spin on how language works in the constitution of space. That is, beyond offering a landscape imbued with indexical meaning, how does language insinuate itself into the spatial, therefore the material, grounding of neoliberalism? In particular, we focus on how language learning increasingly comes to be seen as a spatial project of linguistic investment that involves differentiated evaluations of space and language varieties.

In the neoliberal job market, competence in a language comes to be seen as an important “soft skill” that enhances the value of one’s human capital (Urciuoli, 2008), and learning a language that is considered to be more “valuable” becomes a rational, productive, and even a responsible act of investment (Park, 2010). For instance, beliefs that acquisition of a global language such as English will help one access better opportunities in education and on the job market can lead people to actively pursue the language, even when the language is one that traditionally has not been treated as compatible with their deeper sense of identity (Heller & Duchêne, 2012). How might we understand this highly instrumental and pragmatic view of language learning in spatial terms? Addressing this question can clarify why space matters—why such commodification of language learning cannot be seen as a result of speakers’ neutral and rational choice based on their practical needs, but a process grounded in complex material conditions and inequalities that make up the sociolinguistic and socioeconomic landscape of neoliberalism that we live in.

In our analysis below, we focus on two facets of the spatiality of language learning under neoliberalism. First, spatial competition between different places can appropriate language learning as a resource for branding and selling place. One prominent geographical consequence of neoliberalization is how space can be imbued with certain aesthetic and social qualities so as to attract selective mobilities of people. With the reduction of support from the central state, local municipalities or regions increasingly need to market themselves for revenue, leading to interplace competition (Harvey, 2005; Peck & Tickell, 2002). For this reason, cultural characteristics and qualities of the place often become prominent resources that get mobilized in this process. David Harvey notes:

interplace competition is not simply about attracting production... It is also about attracting consumers through the creation of a cultural centre, a pleasing urban or regional landscape, and the like. Investment in consumption spectacles, the selling of images of places, competition over the definition of cultural and symbolic capital, the revival of vernacular traditions associated with places, all become conflated in interplace competition. (Harvey, 1993, p. 8)

Language constitutes one type of these “consumption spectacles,” as different places can present themselves as more efficient sites for learning certain languages, based on factors such as prevalent multilingualism or (supposed) authenticity of local language varieties (Heller & Duchêne, 2012). For instance, the global spread of English is concurrent with geographical variation in English, resulting in different varieties of English being associated with different values (Park & Wee, 2009). In this context, certain places, for example the US and Canada, may be seen as more conducive to English language learning than, say, Korea

or Singapore, and for that reason, be more attractive to mobile language learners in pursuit of this global language (e.g., Shin, 2012).

Second, the intersection of space and language learning discussed above means that geographical mobility itself can in some contexts become indexical of an ideal neoliberal subject. Valorization of language learning as contributing to the development of human capital implies that language learning acquires the status of what Foucault (1988) terms “technologies of the self,” or practices through which individuals are led to manage and transform themselves (p. 16). Given the spatial nature of language learning, this also means that geographical mobility itself can be seen as one such technology of the self (Bae, 2014a; Park, 2010, 2014). As we will show later, language learners may adopt geographical mobility as a strategy for cultivating their human capital, considering their movement from one locale to another as an investment in their potential as a neoliberal subject. In this case, the symbolic capital one gains from such geographical mobility does not derive purely from newly-acquired linguistic competence; part of it comes from the fact of movement itself because the fact that one has made the deliberate, planned effort to move to the place associated with valued forms of linguistic capital (such as the US) in order to develop oneself as a person with better language skills comes to be seen as evidence of the person’s moral alignment with the neoliberal ideals of endless self-development.

This points to how space and language learning can become a site for reproducing social inequalities in neoliberalism. Mobility is always constrained by material conditions, with factors such as the economic cost of moving to and living in another place or issues of cultural and social integration limiting options of movement for less privileged people. This clearly shows that the promise of language learning through geographical mobility is necessarily a false one, as it is apparent that not anyone can engage in such translocal strategies of securing valued linguistic capital, not to mention that acquisition of linguistic capital alone rarely brings actual material benefits (Park, 2011). Yet, projects of spatial competition, which present certain places as ideal locations for the inculcation of valued linguistic competence, obscure such inequalities as they highlight only the meaning of careful management and development of human capital that is attributed to geographical mobility for language learning. This shows how a focus on spatiality of language learning can be a powerful way to uncover the inner workings of neoliberalism and the problematic inequalities that it reproduces.

In this paper, we explore these two dimensions of the spatial grounding of language learning in neoliberalism as manifested in two specific cases. The first is that of Yangshuo, China, a countryside village that has been reinvented as “the biggest English Corner in China” in an effort to attract lower middle class working professionals who are driven by the country’s neoliberal transformation to improve their spoken English. The second is the Korean phenomenon of *jogji yubak* [early study abroad], in which young children from middle class Korean families are sent overseas to study and acquire fluency in English, so that they may secure an advantageous position in the harsh competition of the Korean educational and job market deeply affected by neoliberalism. The data we discuss below were collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Yangshuo and Singapore, as part of larger research projects to understand educational tourism (Gao, 2012b, 2014) and educational migration (Park & Bae, 2009; Bae, 2014a) respectively. The data from Yangshuo consist of government policy documents on Yangshuo tourism development, media reports on English educational tourism in Yangshuo, participant observation of and interviews with 24 adult language learners at one language school in Yangshuo, all collected by Gao in 2011. The data for

Singapore include interviews with 12 *jogi yuhak* families in 2008, and additional series of interviews with 3 families between 2010 and 2012, all carried out by Bae. Only part of the datasets were included in the discussion below. We look specifically at the underlying language ideologies and self-positioning of the speakers to understand how the speakers' spatial trajectories of language learning could be situated within the material conditions of neoliberalism that characterize both sites.

## **YANGSHUO: THE BIGGEST ENGLISH CORNER IN CHINA**

Yangshuo County is located in the southeast of Guilin City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southern China. As early as 1978, the year that marked China's opening up to the world, Yangshuo was designated by the central government as one of the first tourist destinations open to international tourists in China. Since then, it has been attracting an increasing number of international travelers due to its special Karst geography. However, since the late 1990s, against the national background of the rise of domestic Chinese tourism and the increasing importance of English, Yangshuo started to reposition itself so as to explore the booming domestic tourism market, branding itself as an "English Corner" (that is, a place where people come to practice spoken English by chatting with others in English-only) by utilizing the presence of international travelers and the English language that they brought with them (Gao, 2012b). This led to a rapid rise of English language schools targeting domestic tourists from elsewhere in China, which significantly contributed to the transformation of the local economy. Statistics show that "the number of the schools once reached a historical high of 48 in this small region. From 2004 to 2009, more than 50,000 people altogether came over to learn English, along with more than 200,000 friends and relatives visiting as tourists" (Jiang, 2009, p. 59).

The mode of English language education promoted in Yangshuo can be best illustrated through a folk language learning method – the "FACES successful English learning method" developed by Zhang, a private entrepreneur who spearheaded English educational tourism in Yangshuo. He elaborated on the FACES method during an interview with a local radio station:

My method is to ignore grammatical concepts like tense and others completely, and start straightaway from having conversations with foreigners. ... We should not think of English as knowledge, but as an everyday skill - just like we don't really need to know about physics to learn to ride a bike. ... We should not care so much about *mianzi* [face] – just open your mouth even if you could make mistakes. So our FACES learning method, to say it in English, is *I enjoy losing faces in order to leaning my English way* [sic].<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting this particular approach, slogans are painted along the walls around the areas where several language schools are located, declaring the town as a place to "enjoy speaking English all the time." Chinese people studying at the language schools willfully follow this encouragement, trying to strike up a conversation with the Western travelers they meet on

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<sup>2</sup> Extracted from the school's newspaper; bibliographic information is not reproduced for anonymity. The article also explains that each character of FACES stands for one sub-method of learning English: face-to-face with foreigners; ask and answer, change and change - change one sentence to ten sentences, change short sentences to longer sentences; English to English; swimming successfully.

West Street, a popular local street for foreigners due to the western style cafés and bars that line the street.

So, how did this reinvention of Yangshuo take place, and why has Yangshuo been attracting people to come over to learn English? In this section, we examine how this historical transformation of Yangshuo can be situated within the broader neoliberal transformation of Chinese society, and how the Chinese people's experience of coming to Yangshuo is inseparable from the neoliberal valorization of endless self-development and careful management of human capital.

### **Spatial Transformation through Reinvention of Linguistic Authenticity**

The transformation of Yangshuo occurred as part of the local economic reform under the market economy. Since the 1990s, the landscape of China's economic development came to be accentuated by increased private entrepreneurship and widening regional disparities. Under this geo-economic climate, local economies faced serious challenges due to interplace competition resulting from the increased pressure to achieve economic autonomy and accountability. Privatization of the economy meant a reduction in national and regional subsidies for economic development, and the local government had to assume more autonomy and independence in seeking financial resources, relying more on private investments.

For the local Yangshuo government, the strategy for dealing with such challenges was to turn to a tourism-based economic development strategy. A focus on tourism was seen as an effective strategy not only because of the already-prominent position of Yangshuo as a tourist destination, but also because of the quick returns it promises for investment and the broader effect it could have on the local economy. One local official observed that:

We must recognize that tourism is an economic industry with a large demanding market. And more importantly, it requires relatively less investment capital and yet brings quick economic returns. ... Moreover, the tourism industry is a comprehensive industry which could also bring about development in related industries. It could not only provide a large market for agricultural, industrial and other business products, but also help stimulate the development of transportation, communication, food industry, and entertainment. (Zhao, 1999, pp. 45-46)

It is against this background that we see the growth of the English education industry on West Street, Yangshuo. The presence of Western tourists, ideologies that conceptualize them as "English speaking foreigners," the rise of domestic tourism, increasing emphasis placed on English as a language for success, and the concomitant anxieties of people about the need to improve their English language skills all converged in this particular strategic focus to develop Yangshuo as a tourist destination. With the first English Summer Camp in 1998, which took place with investment from entrepreneurs like Zhang, mentioned above, "educational tourism" (Yangshuo Tourism Bureau 2009) was promoted by the local government as a new attraction for Chinese nationals who wished to learn and speak English in an "authentic" environment. As one official stressed in his article:

We should fully explore the opportunities of mixing Chinese with western cultures by strategically integrating more western elements into local Yangshuo culture. This would

include importing educational resources from both home and abroad, so as to further expand and develop foreign language education as an industry. (Chen, 2009, p. 80)

Just as ethnic tourism elsewhere in China (and other places in the world) relies on the authentication of local languages and cultures (Heller & Duchêne, 2012), in the case of Yangshuo, educational tourism is grounded on the reconstruction and authentication of the space of Yangshuo, in which English and the gathering of foreign tourists there play a prominent role. Since English occupies an increasingly prominent position in China's public education system and is perceived as a key to modernity and prosperity (Bolton & Graddol, 2012), the branding of Yangshuo as a destination for English language learning emerged as a strategy for distinction in the competition with other locations in the Chinese domestic tourism market. The logic of Yangshuo's new marketing strategy is perhaps best summarized in the following statement from the Yangshuo Tourism Bureau:

Yangshuo is a good place to cure your “dumb English” and “deaf English.” ...At West Street, you can always see West Street people talking in fluent English with western travelers for business or just having small talk. Even old grannies in their 70s or teenage kids can chat with “*laowai*” [foreigners] in English. Many western travelers say they just feel no foreignness here. West Street is the largest “English Corner” in China now. (Yangshuo Tourism Bureau, 2009)

Here, the space of Yangshuo, particularly that of West Street, is constructed as an English-speaking place, where authentic interaction with “western travelers” and “foreigners” occurs naturally. It is worth mentioning here that for language schools, native speakers from the inner circle countries (Kachru, 1986) are the preferred teachers (see also Seargeant, 2005), which supposedly helps provide a more authentic learning environment based on the ideology of nativeness (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: A Recruitment Advertisement on the Street. Photo by Shuang Gao.



The English language therefore becomes an important semiotic resource for re-inventing the image of Yangshuo, which in turn is mobilized to attract and channel mobilities of language learners through spatial distinction—in this case, the opportunity to practice English with foreign travelers—as a way of strategically positioning Yangshuo in the context of interplace competition introduced by the changing economic conditions of China.

Another important dimension of the intersection between space and language learning under neoliberalism, though, is how such construction of place has implications for the constitution of neoliberal subjects. The segment above also appeals to the readers' anxiety about their “dumb” and “deaf” English—which refers to inadequately developed competence in speaking and listening—by presenting Yangshuo as a place that can cure such incompetence. Such anxieties indeed play a crucial link in the way the commodification of Yangshuo can work in the first place. This can be seen by looking into the experiences of the people who travel to Yangshuo to become adult language learners and what such experience means for self-development.

### English Language Learning and the Neoliberal Self

While summer time in Yangshuo sees a temporary boom of school children attending intensive English programs, at the language school where Gao did her fieldwork, the regular students were working professionals from small or medium-sized transnational companies in China's urban areas. For those adult students, their decision to come to Yangshuo to study English was mediated by class-based considerations. Unsurprisingly, all of the students interviewed had no prior experience of studying abroad or living overseas. And while some had college degrees, most were working migrants who had moved to the economically vibrant and competitive urban centers in southern China for work. Their choice of where to learn English was thus constrained by economic considerations based on their lower middle class background. For instance, the cost of studying English in Yangshuo was around half of that in cities such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, or Zhuhai, which made Yangshuo a more popular destination for those with limited finances. But more importantly, for all the students, coming to Yangshuo to study English was an important part of their career development; in most cases, they had left or were intending to change their jobs when they came to Yangshuo, hoping that learning English would improve their competitiveness in the job market and lead to a new or better position for work. In other words, learning English was a calculative choice and reflexive decision they made in response to the heightened pace and dynamism of the Chinese economy and the labor market (Ong, 2007, pp. 4-5), as Jon said below:<sup>3</sup>

(Interview with Jon, 36yrs old, salesperson who used to work in Guangdong; has been studying in Yangshuo for seven months)

**Shuang:** why did you decide to quit your job?

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<sup>3</sup> Interviews with students were carried out in English, partly in compliance with the language schools' English-only policy, though Mandarin was also used occasionally. All transcripts are presented in the original languages used. All interviewee names are pseudonyms. English-based pseudonyms (such as Jon's) are meant to capture the naming practice at the school where each student adopted an English name.

**Jon:** because it's not easy to get more order in the market now....because it is difficult time for many companies. Maybe in this financial crisis, many companies meet, meet, er, er, this difficulty, so so I think I must I have to learn something to improve myself, and looking for another job.

Examples like this shows how students learning English at Yangshuo are not just seeking practical competence in English; they are also molding themselves into neoliberal subjects by taking great risks in order to constantly improve and rebrand themselves for better positions. Such self-positioning of students is an outcome to the rapidly changing meaning of work under neoliberalism in China. In China's transformative turn from a planned economy to a market economy, the assignment system, wherein people's work was assigned by the state as an "iron rice bowl" or permanent job, was gradually replaced by a labor market, which means people were encouraged for the first time to actively seek employment at a workplace and at a position of their own choice (see Hoffman, 2010). But the most extensive changes came after Deng Xiaoping's South China Tour in 1992 (Bian, 2009). The 1992 South China Tour was meant to open China to the market economy by setting up certain zones as neoliberal exceptions to authoritarian, socialist state governance (Ong, 2006), and it was at this time that Deng Xiaoping made his famous remark that "to be rich is glorious," re-managing the population by fostering self-actualizing and self-enterprising subjects (Ong, 2007, p. 5). This year also marked the beginning of unprecedented mobility in China, both inter-city and rural-urban, with people seeking opportunities in the private market (Bian, 2009, p. 177).

It is in this historical process that we see the growth of common Chinese professionals, who constitute the emerging Chinese middle class, as both the key players in the rising market economy, and also the most direct targets of neoliberal thinking, with constant pressure to become "educated and self-managing citizens who can compete in global knowledge markets" (Ong, 2007, p. 6). Chinese working professionals are supposed to practice "self-enterprise and self reflexivity in the face of market uncertainty" (Ong, 2008, p. 184) and even to take further risks, including quitting jobs to learn English, the language that defines what "success" means under globalization—an idea that is actively promoted by English language schools in Yangshuo, as put forward by one school's slogan "success in English, success in life" (see Figure 2).

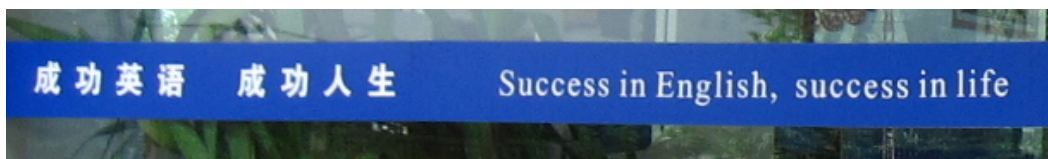


Figure 2 "success in English, success in life." Photo by Shuang Gao, 2011.

However, one important point here is that not all members of society are affected equally by such neoliberal ideologies. In the case of China, it is the lower middle class working professionals who form the majority of adult English language learners in Yangshuo and who represent one such group most affected by the neoliberal transformation of China, due to their socioeconomically insecure position. For instance, Amy, who had almost ten years' working experience at an international company, was a manager in charge of her company's business transactions with about 19 countries. She nevertheless quit her job to come to Yangshuo, not just because of her incompetence in English, but also because this

led to disrespect from her subordinates, who had better educational qualifications and better competence in English than she did:

(Interview with Amy, 30yrs old, manager of a company in Guangdong; has been studying in Yangshuo for ten months)

**Shuang:** Why English is still important? You had already become a manager...

**Amy:** Because I want to be 名正言顺的经理 [*a manager in the real sense of the word*]. No complaints from my employees. Sometimes my assistants would compare with me in a quite sensational way. Just like, why you don't know English and you can get higher salary than us? And if I let them do the translation, 有时候假装没听到, 尤其是 pay day [*they sometimes pretended they didn't hear me, especially when it was pay day*]. I can feel that. Sometimes I asked them to do some extra work, they refused me. They said 'I don't like to work overtime, because my salary is too low, my position is low, you can do it, don't ask us.' ((laughter))

**Shuang:** but you are the manager

**Amy:** sometimes they just leave the company without getting the salary. They just quit. They told me they think it's unfair, they think the salary is too low.

**Shuang:** So what English really means to you?

**Amy:** I can do my future work well without translators. If I have a high position, I also need an assistant, but not for translating.

For Amy, her weaker English language competence compared to that of her subordinates is not simply a practical problem that interferes with her ability to do her job as a manager; it is also a moral and affective issue, in the sense that it becomes a site of tension between her and her subordinates and ultimately leads her to question whether she is “a manager in the real sense of the word.” In other words, Amy's English language competence can be seen as having deep implications for her self-positioning as a neoliberal subject. According to Amy's account, having an administrative assistant testifies to her high position as a manager, but having a language assistant/interpreter only undermines her professionalism (“I can do my future work well without translators. If I have a high position, I also need an assistant, but not for translating”). In this sense, investment in English is internalized and naturalized as a moral issue and a necessary component of the ideal image of neoliberal self. Command of English not only helps accomplish work, maximize profit, but, more importantly, authenticates a professional identity that must be enacted through the demonstration of English as proof of legitimacy, credibility, and authority (Wee, 2008, p. 261-264). Her bold move to quit her job and move to Yangshuo to invest time and money in learning English is precisely a way of realigning herself with this neoliberal ideal, as it positions herself as willingly taking risks to further develop herself rather than remain safely secluded in her already-achieved position as a manager.

In other words, due to the spatial grounding of language learning under neoliberalism, geographical mobility itself comes to represent a dedicated investment in self development, a professional morality, and an ideal subject under neoliberalism, a lack of which would indicate less initiative and commitment and invite questioning, doubt, distrust, or even contempt. It is in this neoliberal turn that Chinese working professionals start their quest for English in the hope of a better self and a better future.

Therefore, the reimagination of Yangshuo as a space for English language learning is inseparable from neoliberal structures of competition, which involves not only interplace competition that drives local economic reforms, but also competition in the job market wherein the cultivation and refinement of human capital is a constant concern. It is against this context that Yangshuo appropriates the presence of foreigners and resemiotizes the space of West Street as a place for language learning.

## **KOREAN JOGI YUHA<sup>K</sup> FAMILIES**

The second case that we will discuss has to do with the recent growth of early study abroad, or *jogi yuhak*, among the South Korean middle class. *Jogi yuhak* refers to the study abroad of pre-university children, which has become increasingly popular among Korean middle class families since the beginning of the 21st century (Bae, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Kang, 2012a, 2012b; Kim, 2010; Lo Abelmann, Kwon and Okazaki, forthcoming; Park & Bae, 2009; Park & Wee, 2012; Shin, 2012; Song, 2010). *Jogi yuhak* can take many forms, ranging from relatively short time of about a year spent abroad, to longer study abroad of several years, or completing education all the way up to university; it may also involve one of many different family arrangements, such as the child sent abroad alone to live with a guardian or at a boarding school, the mother accompanying the child overseas while the father stays behind (commonly known as *gileogi gajok* or geese family), or the entire family moving overseas for the primary goal of providing the child an opportunity to study abroad. But in any case, *jogi yuhak* is primarily a strategy for inculcating in the child valuable social and cultural capital that can be beneficial in competition back at home and in the global world.

The most prominent type of capital that is pursued through *jogi yuhak* is that of language, particularly English. The common belief that immersion into an English-speaking environment at early age is most conducive to the development of proficiency makes English-speaking countries such as the US, Canada, or Australia the most popular destinations for *jogi yuhak*. Such competence in English is particularly important in contemporary Korean society. Since the 1990s, English language competence has been increasingly seen as a crucial skill for admission to prestigious schools, as well as employment and promotion, a belief that has led to heated nationwide investments in English language learning, commonly called the *yeongeo yeolpung* [English fever] (Park, 2009). *Jogi yuhak* is supposed to equip the child with an extremely valuable resource for competition with other students; “native-like” competence in English is meant to help her or him secure an advantageous position in gaining better educational opportunities such as admission to elite high schools or top universities in Korea and abroad.

The Korean *jogi yuhak* phenomenon, then, is one illustration of how international mobility becomes appropriated as a strategy for language learning. In what ways is this connection between language learning and spatial movement mediated by the conditions of neoliberalism? In this section, we explore this question by considering how *jogi yuhak* can be seen as a neoliberal project of human capital development and what kind of effects does this strategy of transnational education have on the subjectivities of students and their families.

### **Early Study Abroad, Class, and Space**

*Jogi yuhak* is closely related to Korea’s recent neoliberal transformation that has taken place since the 1990s. As the development-state model that drove economic growth during

the 1970s started to reach its limits, the multi-business conglomerates, or *jaebeoks*, and the Korean government, closely tied with the interests of those conglomerates, began pushing for multiple modes of reforms, under the name of boosting national competitiveness. One major aspect of this transformation was the deregulation of the labor market, which led to the abolishment of a seniority-based wage system and expectations of lifetime employment. Thus, over the past two decades, jobs have increasingly become irregular, temporary, and contract-based, resulting in an unprecedented precarity of work and a dismal employment rate (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009). Such harsh conditions of the job market introduced great anxiety among the middle class, who feared that they may not be able to pass their class position onto the next generation. This led to greater investments, with parents trying to prepare their children for competition in getting into better schools and helping them secure valuable credentials that can translate into better and more stable jobs in the future.

As noted above, this led middle class parents to see *jogi yubak* as a way of providing their children with a strong sense of distinction. The symbolic capital of English acquired abroad, the broader cultural experience that transcends the Korean education system, and the cosmopolitan comfort in the world that comes from time spent overseas were all understood as indexes that would distinguish the *jogi yubak* child as a neoliberal subject, well-poised for the maximal realization of his or her potential in the global stage. In the words of the mother of Juni, a 3rd grade *jogi yubak* child who has been studying in Singapore for two and a half years:

[The reason I came here] is to have my children study English in an English-speaking country so that they can go into a wider world. I think this exposure now will have a great influence on the children. ... My goal for now is for them to have a broader mind, to experience many different countries and to live there. I think their way of thinking will certainly be different from someone who has only lived in Korea mingling with Koreans. [Juni's mother, August 2010]<sup>4</sup> (Bae, 2014a)

In this example, Juni's mother talks about her children's early study abroad experience as allowing them to "go into a wider world," leading to "a broader mind" associated with being cosmopolitan. While parents of *jogi yubak* students place great importance on their children's acquisition of English, they rarely talk about it only as a matter of pure linguistic competence. As the example above illustrates, it always involves a development of the child's future potential, which, under the logic of capitalism, constitutes human capital. English acquired through early study abroad is both an index of and a tool for further developing the value of that human capital, something that is unachievable if the child is only constrained to the space of Korea, only mingling with other Koreans.

This shows that *jogi yubak* is not just about acquiring competence in the global language of English but is a case of language learning incorporated into a spatial project of neoliberal self-development. The privileged Korean middle class, using its geographical mobility based on economic and cultural capital, exploits flexible movement between geographical locations to maximize the value of their children's human capital. At the same time, such neoliberal projects of self-development deepen the materially and spatially-constituted nature of language learning. Projects of *jogi yubak* are mediated by unequal distribution of economic

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<sup>4</sup> All interviews with *jogi yubak* parents were conducted in Korean.

resources between different social classes, and they take place within specific geographical contexts, facilitated by conditions of mobility and immobility; and all this foregrounds language learning as a process firmly grounded in space.

*Jogi yuhak* works as a neoliberal project because ideologies that link language and space are effective in imposing distinctions in value upon different geographical locations. The project of *jogi yuhak* inherently makes certain assumptions about language learning (Park & Bae, 2009): that certain language varieties have greater economic value and convertibility than others, that different language varieties are closely associated with different geographical spaces, that certain geographical spaces are more conducive to the acquisition of valued linguistic capital, and so on. Through such ideologies, geographical spaces are resemiotized and evaluated in terms of whether they serve as viable destinations for *jogi yuhak*.

For instance, while English is pursued as a key linguistic resource through *jogi yuhak*, not all varieties of English are equally seen as valuable; it is the traditional native speaker varieties of English, particularly standard American English, that becomes the most valued object of pursuit, given South Korea's close and dependent relationship with the United States. Moreover, such varieties are understood to be directly linked with specific geographical spaces, namely the countries that make up the Kachruvian inner circle, such as the US, Canada, and Australia. In turn, most effective and authentic acquisition of those varieties is assumed to take place in those countries, rather than other countries, such as Korea. For this reason, the US becomes the ideal destination for *jogi yuhak*, followed by other countries of the inner circle such as Canada and Australia.

However, while inner circle countries of the West are recognized as ideal destinations for early study abroad, the various material conditions of transnational movement lead to multiple and complex trajectories of *jogi yuhak* and a proliferation of possible study abroad destinations. For instance, as transnational mobility requires the support of economic and cultural capital as well as access to relevant social networks of migration, *jogi yuhak* to inner circle countries, which tends to be costlier, is not always possible even for some relatively well-off middle class families. Moreover, the valorization of individuality under neoliberalism also leads families to seek alternative destinations that can add a sense of distinction to the character of the child.

As a result, several other locations outside the inner circle have emerged as popular destinations for *jogi yuhak*. For instance, Singapore has emerged as a popular *jogi yuhak* destination since 2003, when the Singapore Tourism Board embarked on a campaign to attract foreign students from all over Asia in order to market the country as an education hub (Huang & Yeoh, 2005; Knight, 2011). Singapore offers several points of attraction to families considering *jogi yuhak*, including the possibility of learning another global language, Mandarin (due to the country's multilingualism and bilingual education policy); the country's disciplined and competition-oriented education system; and the geographical proximity to Korea (Kang, 2012a; Kim, 2010; Park & Bae, 2009). For these reasons, places like Singapore are often used by *jogi yuhak* families as a springboard for moving to more ideal destinations such as the US.

All these issues surrounding the choice of destination for study abroad can be understood as a sort of branding of place, which, unlike the case of Yangshuo above, is led not only by active promotion of place by local authorities, but also by *jogi yuhak* families who compare and contrast the relative benefits and drawbacks of different destinations and the

implications all this will have on the child's development as a neoliberal subject. In a way, this is the other side of the picture of interplace competition: as language learning leads different locations to present themselves as more valuable places where acquisition of linguistic skills may take place, potential migrants, positioned as consumers, are led to evaluate and assess these different locations in terms of the value that those places will add to their human capital.

### Neoliberal Subjectivity and Anxieties of Mobility

The multiple destinations and complex trajectories of *jogi yuhak* also have consequences for the subjectivity of the families, which points to another way in which the dimension of space is implicated in such neoliberal projects of language learning. While the working professionals coming to Yangshuo are driven by anxieties about their insecure positioning at the workplace indexed by their lack of English language skills, the relatively wealthy *jogi yuhak* parents well on track in sending their children to the destination of their dreams also experience much anxiety, as they constantly reevaluate and reassess the value and convertibility of the linguistic capital the children are acquiring through their study abroad.

For example, Singapore's status as an outer circle country of world Englishes (Kachru, 1985) and the notable presence of a local English variety, Singlish, was a cause for concern for many *jogi yuhak* parents, as they worried that English acquired in Singapore would not be recognized as valuable linguistic capital. It was not simply the case that the parents and the children rejected Singlish outright as a non-standard, illegitimate language without any value, however. The *jogi yuhak* families studied by Bae Sohee (2014b), for instance, considered Singlish as a useful interactional resource for engaging with local, Singaporean students, and thus an important way of building solidarity and rapport in the context of local culture (see also Kang, 2012b). Their problematization of Singlish came into play when they evaluated the value of the children's linguistic capital in terms of how it would allow them to be successful in the competitions they would face along their future trajectory in space. This can be illustrated by the following statement from the mother of Minsu, a 3rd grade child who has been studying in Singapore for 16 months:

I heard that, in Korea nowadays, *jogi yuhak* students who studied in non-English speaking countries such as Singapore or Hong Kong and acquired a local accent of English are called "Hong-Sing idiots." And they are laughed at and discriminated in famous language institutions in Korea. My son is using much Singlish. But I really don't want to hear him speak such cheap English. So sometimes I tell him not to use Singlish. Then at least he can understand what the problem is with his English. ... A real headache is his younger brother. He learned Singlish from very young age and attended only a Singaporean kindergarten. He cannot tell Singlish from American English. That is a really big problem. [Minsu's mother, April 2011] (Bae, 2014a)

In this example, Minsu's mother speaks of Singlish as "cheap English," "a problem" and "a headache," displaying negative attitudes towards Singlish, even though in reality it is a variety that has a very stable presence and a strong connection with local identity (Chew, 2007). But on closer inspection, we can see that such evaluation of Singlish and the speaker's anxiety about her son's acquisition of Singlish is articulated in terms of material conditions of space. From the mother's perspective, the low value of local English acquired in

Singapore becomes a real concern when she considers its convertibility across markets (Park & Wee, 2012) rooted in different spatial contexts—i.e., how it would be evaluated back in Korea when the child returns from his study abroad. It is also important to note she is concerned about how English acquired in Singapore would affect the child's mobility beyond Korea as well—she is discussing the negative reaction the child may receive in the context of gaining access to popular private language institutes, which are often seen as crucial for entering prestigious secondary schools in Korea and Ivy League universities overseas.

In other words, the multiple pathways and itineraries that are opened up by a child's *jogi yuhak*, instead of helping the families feel more prepared for neoliberal competition, introduces greater anxiety, as they constantly need to think of how the linguistic resources acquired by the child will be evaluated in other spaces that he or she will venture into in the future. This was particularly the case for *jogi yuhak* families in Singapore, for whom Singapore is usually not the final destination, but a springboard to the next destination, likely the inner circle countries of the West (Bae, 2014a, 2014b). In this sense, *jogi yuhak* families need to constantly imagine their future trajectories in spatial terms and evaluate the value of the linguistic capital the child is acquiring, to make sure they are well prepared for future competition—ultimately with “native speakers,” who ideologically occupy the center of the global linguistic market of English. This anxiety is again clearly reflected in another statement from Minsu's mother, recorded a year later from the extract above:

Minsu is doing very well at school, being a so-called “model student” who is always the top in his class. But even though his English is quite good now, it is just the English of a 3rd grader. I realized that he will not be able to reach the level of an adult English native speaker. So the English he has acquired now cannot be the English with which he can confidently compete with other native speakers of English when he becomes an adult. [Minsu's mother, May 2012.] (Bae, 2014a)

The constant reassessment of the value of one's linguistic repertoire and recalculation of one's future path based on such reassessment that we can see here aligns very closely with a neoliberal subjecthood that is characterized by endless self-reflection and self-development and does not rely on past achievements but strives to exceed one's boundaries. The fact that Minsu tops his class in Singapore does not offer satisfaction to his mother, as being content with what he has achieved so far will only work to limit the endless potential he has in him; instead, she is compelled to think about how he will compare with others in a wider world, where his ultimate competition is “native speakers of English,” who represent the center of the global arena.

This shows how the spatial grounding of *jogi yuhak* allows such projects of language learning to be more firmly linked with an inculcation and internalization of neoliberal subjectivity. The constant assessment of the value of one's human capital and the endless struggle to realize and refine it is precisely what constitutes the ideal neoliberal subject, and the case of Korean *jogi yuhak* shows us that the anxiety that drives such endless self-development cannot be understood apart from the spatial conditions of transnational mobility and the language ideologies that imbue them with meaning. It is through this dimension of subjectivity that transnational strategies of language learning become a powerful mechanism for justifying and reproducing the logic of neoliberalism.



## CONCLUSION: SPACE MATTERS

In this paper, we tried to present Yangshuo's rise as an English corner and the Korean *jogi yubak* phenomenon as spatial articulations of the way language learning comes to be incorporated into neoliberalism. In Yangshuo's case, the presence of foreigners and their authenticized linguistic capital is appropriated by the local government to transform and resignify the space of Yangshuo County in the context of increasing interplace competition in China's shift towards a market economy. In turn, lower middle class working professionals who are pressed to position themselves as ideal neoliberal subjects take new risks by traveling to Yangshuo to seek an authentic yet affordable place for English language learning. In the case of *jogi yubak*, ideologies of language that valorize English as a global language and language skills as a quality that indexes neoliberal personhood transform mobility and transnational education into strategies for middle class parents to maximize the value of their children's human capital and to pass on their middle class status to the next generation. The constant reevaluation and reassessment of the value of linguistic capital acquired through the process of transnational education then leads to greater internalization and rationalization of the logic of neoliberal self-development.

Through both cases, we tried to show how a focus on the dimension of space can illuminate at least some of the mechanisms through which language comes to be incorporated under the neoliberal machine that extends the control of capital to every aspect of our lives. Socially constructed space imbues language with differentiated meaning, transforming it into a useful resource for imposing a hierarchy of value on society, facilitating interplace competition and enabling mobility to serve as an index for neoliberal subjecthood. More specifically, we saw that

- language constitutes an important semiotic resource for repositioning and branding place;
- language learning can be understood as a spatial project that is mediated by class-based evaluation and comparison of (commodified) space and local language varieties;
- geographical mobility, as a strategy for language learning, serves as a neoliberal technology of the self, leading to internalization and naturalization of the logic of calculative self-development.

In both cases, these points were evidenced through the way language ideologies rationalize the social meanings and geographical distribution of linguistic resources and work to provide specific material grounding to projects and processes of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism therefore needs to be understood with sensitivity to the ideological and material conditions of spatial differentiation, as well as to other dimensions of materiality that constitute our world, including social class and political logic of the state (Ong, 2007). We have shown that language learning always occurs within a specific material context, one important dimension of which is that of space. When we study either the working professionals coming to Yangshuo to learn English or the Korean parents embarking on *jogi yubak* for a better future for their children, it is impossible to understand their choices, strategies, experiences, affordances, and anxieties without referring to the spatial context that provides a material basis for their language learning.

This observation provides an important insight for applied linguistics, which is that material conditions of language learning must be made an important focus for our research. Applied linguistics has long tended to approach language learning and language use as a cognitive process; even after the more recent social and critical turn in applied linguistics, a focus on material relations of class and political economy still remain a desideratum, with large body of work maintaining its focus on issues of culture and identity (Block, 2013). For this reason, we argue that a heightened awareness of the link between language learning, space, and mobility will allow us to explore the material constraints and inequalities of language learning with greater sensitivity, and that a focus on the spatial grounding of language learning can allow applied linguistics to make a unique contribution to the critique of neoliberalism.

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