Towards a practice of translanguaging subtitling for the mediatised articulation of *fangyan*

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This article addresses an underexplored intersection between subtitling and translanguaging with reference to the representation of diverse Chinese *fangyan* in hip-hop music videos. Drawing on recent progress in the intersection between translanguaging and Translation Studies, the article sketches the multilingualism of the Han ethnic majority and its precarious existence under the governmental policy and language planning of China. Second, it contextualises the rising audibility and visibility of local speeches and non-standard writing in cinematic, metrolingual, and digital cultures. This highlights the social and technological conditions that enable culture creators and language users to practice novel representations of linguistic diversity and variations in the subtitling medium. Furthermore, the case-study analyses illustrate how Chinese hip-hop musicians assemble linguistic, multimodal, and multisemiotic resources to effect translanguaging performance across different communicational repertoires. The conclusion outlines the practical and theoretical implications of translanguaging subtitles for alternative media representations of linguacultural diversities in China and beyond.

Keywords: subtitling, translanguaging, *fangyan*, hip-hop, alternative media representations

1. Introduction

Although the co-existence of multiple languages is a reality of many societies, multilingualism is underrepresented in the media, and research has rarely addressed the challenge posed by such plurality of languages (Díaz-Cintas 2011, 215). China is a multilingual country with 56 ethnic groups that speak 129 languages (Sun, Zengyi, and Xing 2007). Mandarin, widely known as the official language of the

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People's Republic of China (PRC), is a language of the Han, the largest ethnic group in China.

The Sinitic family comprises seven branches of *fangyan* (regional languages), which have distinctive systems of grammar, phonology, syntax, and vocabulary, even within the same branch (see Norman 1988). The seven branches are: (a) *Guanhua* in northern and south-western China, which later became Mandarin; (b) *Wu* in the south-eastern Chinese provinces and regions in Jiangsu, Shanghai, and Zhejiang; (c) *Yue* (or Cantonese) in the southern provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi as well as Hong Kong; (d) *Min* in the Fujian province; (e) *Xiang* in the Hunan province; (f) *Gan* in the Jiangxi province; and (g) *Hakka* or *Kejiahua* in southern China (Liu 2016).

The use of *fangyan* languages and their varieties demonstrates a grassroots appeal for the protection of linguistic and cultural diversity (Zhang 2015). In cinematic subtitling, questions arise when dialogue in a film categorised as 'Chinese' based on its language of origin is performed substantially in one or more local vernaculars and their varieties, as seen in the opening scene of 色，戒 *Se, jie* 'Lust, caution' (Lee 2007). The scene shows a group of women playing *mah-jong* and chatting in vernacular Shanghainese. Without Simplified Chinese subtitles, the dialogue may be incomprehensible for most audiences in China. In comparison, linguistic diversity is more conspicuously represented in the film 金陵十三钗 *Jinling shisan chai* 'The flowers of war' (Zhang 2011), where the film director adopted Nanjing dialect, Shanghainese, English, and Japanese to reflect the multilingual atmosphere during the Nanjing Massacre in 1937. The aesthetic application of multilingualism is depicted in the range of characters and other unspoken meanings. Although the Simplified Chinese subtitles bridge the instant transmission of dialogic information, they fail to convey significant contextual information owing to the marginal representation of local Chinese languages and language varieties in the standard writing system (Zhang 2015).

The use and textual representation of *fangyan* in Chinese-language films and other narrative media production raise a dilemma for the subtitling medium. Although the use of *fangyan* languages and their varieties allows films to convey "the marginal and the unassimilated" rhetoric beyond the party-state's framework and therefore depict "characters in nationalistic and socialist themes as participants in a broad social mainstream" (Gunn 2006, 158), the translation of such cinematic multilingualism for the Chinese audience remains a problem. Subtitlers are required to produce an appropriately condensed version of the meaning and communicative intention of the source language speech, which may require eschewing the pragmatic and sociolinguistic complexities of the original conversational interaction (Remael 2003, 237). Therefore, multilingual dialogue is retained if its occurrence is frequent enough to require audiences to be aware of its

existence, or it is not presented in translation at all because it occurs only briefly and is thus not qualitatively important to the audience's understanding of the plot (Díaz-Cintas 2011, 220). The reliance on Simplified Written Chinese (SWC) forces subtitlers to opt for omission, even though current subtitling technologies offer alternative and more creative representations of cultural and sonic aspects of languages and language varieties. Therefore, the diversity and distinction of *fangyan* languages and their varieties can be easily elided because of the spatial and temporal constraints, the demands of precise synchronisation, and the instantaneity of transmission.

The creative and tactical flows of translanguaging may provide practical solutions for screen translators to cope with the increasingly rich media representation of linguistic diversity. Translanguaging refers to "an assemblage of diverse material, biological, semiotic, and cognitive properties and capacities, which languaging agents orchestrate in real-time and across a diversity of timescales" (Thibault 2017, 82). Whereas translation often conforms to individual, institutional, discursive, and ideological norms and objectives, "translanguaging is language from below and resistant to the normativities of dominant varieties of language" (Baynham and Lee 2019, 182). It is a language practice that integrates the functions and usage of different languages and language varieties for dynamic and critical knowledge construction (Li 2018, 15). Envisaged as a practical theory of language, translanguaging enables critical analysis of multilingual speakers and immigrants whose daily language practice results in "a Babelian realm where a plethora of tongues disrupt traditional categorical spaces in relation to language" (Lee and Li 2021, 394). In the Chinese context, translanguaging offers a critical heuristic that underscores the creative convergence of languages and language varieties, semiotic modalities, and technological modalities over the national–local spectrum.

It is postulated in this article that the visualisation of *fangyan* and *fangyan* dialects can be approached as mediatised phenomena of translanguaging and translation. Language users assemble different resources from their online and offline repertoires to facilitate creative and translational processes. They consciously modify their sociocultural identities and values without complying with the social interaction norms structured by the dominant discourse. The assemblage combines a cohort of linguistic and semiotic resources rooted in diverse histories, modes, feelings, and languages for linguistic and non-linguistic cognitive and semiotic systems to intersect.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. Section 2 sketches the diversity of *fangyan* in the Han ethnic majority and the precarious existence of such linguistic diversity under governmental policies and language planning. Section 3 draws on research into mediatisation to explore the audiovisual and

textual representations of *fangyan* languages and their varieties in Chinese-language cinematic, metrolingual, and digital cultures. We use non-standard forms in subtitled *fangyan* lyrics in hip-hop music videos to illustrate the creative visualisation of *fangyan* languages and their varieties. This serves to highlight how language users assemble linguistic, multimodal, and multisemiotic resources in subtitles to effect translanguaging articulations in their bottom-up engagement with different communicational repertoires, as discussed in Section 4. The conclusion proposes a practical guideline for translanguaging subtitling and speculates on the theoretical implications of translanguaging for translation and non-translation in the subtitling medium as a means of critical engagement with linguistic diversities worldwide.

2. The minoritisation of *fangyan* and the rise of putonghua

This section takes the concept of 'monolanguage' as a point of departure. Gramling (2021, 14) adopts the term to refer to the named languages that are historically produced as ubiquitous integers in different linguacultural or national contexts despite ample and persistent evidence which problematises their tenability. A national language allows state business to be conducted in the most efficient manner and is used to unite citizens in a uniform national community (Wright 2004, 8). China unifies fifty-six ethnic groups with different cultural and linguistic traditions under the same national identity as Chinese citizens (Zhou 2008a, 5). Ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversities are further subverted by the official prescription of Putonghua as the national lingua franca. Although relationships and translational practices between the languages of ethnic minorities and Putonghua offer great scope for further research (Li, Qian, and Meylaerts 2017), we will, hereafter, delve into the linguistic heterogeneity within the Han, the majority ethnic group in China.

In ancient China, the seven regional languages were spoken in the seven autonomous feudal states, respectively. The polyglot ecosystem lasted until 221 BCE, when the first centralised feudal regime in Chinese history, the Qin Dynasty, standardised a unified ideographic writing system across the Middle Kingdom, which was substantially inhabited by the Han ethnic group (Wang 1989). The uniform ideographic characters underwent no noteworthy changes until the mid-1950s, when the communist government launched nationwide linguistic reforms (Rohsenow 2004). The common writing system has so far functioned not as only a significant means of ruling regimes' governance (Zhou and Ross 2004), but also as the cornerstone of ethno-linguistic cohesion among the Han Chinese and national unification (Li 2006). It may have been impossible to

maintain the shared ethnicity of the Han Chinese had the writing system turned to alphabetisation, given the vast geographic stretch and the diverse and complex vernacular varieties spoken among the Han Chinese throughout history (Liu 2016).

Despite their distinct and self-contained characteristics, the seven *fangyan* groups have so far been considered dialect(s) of Mandarin. As the pre-eminent Chinese linguist and translator Chao (1968, 5) claimed:

> The historical association of the speakers of the dialects has always been maintained not only by the use of a common system of writing, but also by the use of a common classical idiom, based on a common body of literature, and more recently by the general use of a common modern dialect, usually called Mandarin, so that there is a linguistic sense, as well as a politico-geographical sense in which one can speak of the Chinese language.

DeFrancis (1984, 57) considers neither 'language' nor 'dialect' sufficient for conveying the ambiguity and obscurity of *fangyan* and instead coins "regionalect" as an umbrella term. As intelligibility between speakers of different regional languages is limited, the term *fangyan* shares more common ground with discrete languages than with dialects of the same language. The languages are spoken by officials in the capital cities of ancient Chinese dynasties as standard language(s), and *fangyan* are used by speakers living outside the capital cities and play a limited role in official and literary contexts (Hannas 1997). Thus, the term 'dialect(s)' entails a lack of social prestige, as dialects mostly exist in spoken forms alone, and impose a socio-politically minor status upon the notion of *fangyan*. It is imprecise to label Mandarin as a dialect, especially when it is used as the equivalent of 'the Chinese language'. Notwithstanding this, policies are implemented to enforce Putonghua as the national language and thus limit the public awareness of Chinese linguistic diversity.

Shortly after the founding of the PRC in 1949, the government began to promote Putonghua as the standardised form of the modern Chinese language. They adopted the phonological system of Beijing speech (or Pekingese) for the norms of pronunciation and drew on the textual patterns of twentieth-century vernacular Chinese literature or *baihuawen* for the grammatical prescription (Chen 1999, 34). The standardisation of Putonghua is further explained in 语法修辞讲话 *Yufa xiuci jianghua* 'Lectures on grammar and rhetoric' — a series of lectures given by Lü and Zhu (1951) in which they also laid the principles for vocabulary, syntax, text structure, and punctuation for written texts, and which are deemed as the blueprint for accurate writing. Despite the profound political implications of the choice of Pekingese, as Beijing has been the capital of contemporary China and that of successive feudal dynasties since the late thirteenth century, the city

and its local language, which is a variation of Mandarin (Li 2006) have little to do with the term 'Putonghua', which is "the direct descendant" of the official *koiné* spoken by officials in the late nineteenth century (Coblin 2000, 549). The term 'Putonghua' was first coined in the late nineteenth century to mean 'general language', which had negative connotations in terms of being the vulgar form of written language. It was not until the mid-1950s that the communist government enforced Putonghua as common speech and the national lingua franca of China thereafter.

The prevailing status of Putonghua in official and public domains once raised the fear of the eventual abolition of *fangyan* (Guo 2004). As emphasised by 中华人民共和国国家通用语言文字法 *Zhonghua renmingongheguo guojiatongyongyuyanwenzifa* 'The PRC national commonly used language and script law' implemented in 2001 (the 2001 Law),[1] coupled with the revision of the PRC Constitution in 1982, Putonghua is prioritised in political, legal, financial, and educational contexts, among others; it is a mandatory language at school for both Han and minority ethnic groups (Zhou 2008b, 6).[2] By law, Putonghua is the principal language for radio and television broadcasts and domestic films, and *fangyan* languages and their varieties in mass media should not be used, according to the 广电总局关于进一步重申电视剧使用规范语言的通知 *Guangdianzongju guanyu jinyibu chongshen dianshiju shiyong guifanyuyande tongzhi* 'Circular of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television on reiterating TV plays using standard language' (2005),[3] issued by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT). Contrary to the official language planning and restrictions, protecting language diversity is fundamental to the Constitution of China, as it states, "all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages and to preserve or reform their own folkways and customs" (Constitution of the People's Republic of China, Article 4).[4]

In fearing the extinction of non-Putonghua languages, Chinese linguists and literary scholars have invoked the importance of linguistic co-existence and

1. See http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_619/200409/3131.html. Last accessed on 11 October 2023.

2. The document in Chinese can be accessed at http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_619/200409/3131.html, and its English translation can be found at http://www.eduzhai.net/yingyu/615/763/yingyu_246832.html. Last accessed on 11 October 2023.

3. The full text of the Circular can be accessed at http://www.sarft.gov.cn/art/2005/10/15/art_106_4370.html. Last accessed on 11 October 2023.

4. The official English translation of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China can be accessed at http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007–11/15/content_1372963.htm. Last accessed on 11 October 2023.

diversity. They have emphasised that the promotion of a common, standardised language should not lead to the extinction of regional languages and their dialectal varieties. Instead, their preservation and proliferation would enrich the national lingua franca and assist rather than hinder its growth in public domains (e.g., Hou 1994; Xu 1999). Li (2007), the former director of the Department of Language Planning and Administration, stressed that China's non-Putonghua languages should be provided a broader space of application and development to preserve cultural heritage and assist academic research in areas such as cultural anthropology.

Fei (1989) applies the term 多元一体 *duoyuanyiti* 'diversity in uniformity' to describe the dynamic relationship between *fangyan* and Putonghua against the backdrop of identity cohesion among the historic sociocultural and linguistic divisions of Han ethnicity. The term initially described linguistic and cultural relations between the Han ethnic majority and minority ethnic groups in the process of constructing and negotiating their shared Chinese identity. On the sociolinguistic complexity of the Han, Fei (1989) emphasises that *fangyan* and Putonghua are interdependent rather than mutually exclusive, that the central position assigned to Putonghua as the lingua franca in China does not impose its superiority on *fangyan* but enhances the capacity to strengthen ethnic and national unification, and that the consensus and negotiations between *fangyan* and Putonghua reinforce rather than shatter their uniformity within the Sinitic family.

Among the achievements of the academic campaign is the rise of non-Putonghua television programmes at the local level. These programmes continue to flourish despite the prohibitive and restrictive orders issued by the SAPPRFT. The authorities withdrew their outright ban of non-Putonghua Chinese-language programmes in the mass media owing to positive audience responses (Zhang and Guo 2012). For example, the 2022 Chinese New Year's Eve Gala aired on the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) began with a music video that contained non-Putonghua utterances and popular slang like 恭喜发财 *gong hei fat choy* (a Cantonese greeting often used during the Lunar New Year) and 奇葩 *qipa* (a slang expression that describes atypical, exceptional, and unusual personalities or behaviour). This is to maintain the party-state's agenda of upholding (albeit superficially) the Confucian tradition of 以民为本 *yiminweiben* 'people-based governance' to strengthen the Party's legitimacy and political domination.

The aesthetic, entertainment, and commercial values of *fangyan* and their varieties are also being (re)discovered by media producers and filmmakers, which has brought about some degree of relaxation in government policy. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the spread of user-generated content on the Internet has instigated a grassroots appeal to diversify Sinitic languages. Section 3

explores this emerging practice with reference to filmmaking, metrolingual texts, and the user-driven hip-hop culture which predominantly spread in digital habitats.

3. The mediatisation of *fangyan* in audiovisual and metrolingual media

In this section, we investigate the prosodic and visual representations of *fangyan* languages and their varieties in Chinese audiovisual and metrolingual media through the conceptual lens of mediatisation. As an extension of mediation, which concerns the role of mediated communication in the social construction of meaning, mediatisation emphasises the saturating effect of media, information, and communication technologies on the changes arising from sociocultural domains (Couldry 2012; Couldry and Hepp 2013). Therefore, mediatisation is a modernisation process which encompasses the changing human imaginations, relationships, and interactions in the civilization processes of high modernity (Hjarvard 2013).

Research into mediatisation views the presence of media as the structural condition to social interaction and cultural practice (see Jansson 2022). Such research goes beyond media-centric themes (e.g., production, distribution, and consumption) to create awareness of infrastructural changes in global media contexts; the changing relationship among media, culture, and society; as well as the subsequent and long-term transformations brought by such changes to the ways people interact with one another and the broader social realities (Ekström et al. 2016; Pallas 2020). As demonstrated by Androutsopoulos (2014), mediatisation can instigate non-media social actors, such as speakers of minority or minoritised languages, to autonomously (and often in collective acts) reconstruct and sensitise others to their sociolinguistic worlds.

Critical insights are still lacking in the Chinese context where the domestic linguistic heterogeneity is largely attributed to the dyad of the Han majority and the ethnic minorities. In comparison with audiovisual translation and archiving of ethnic minority languages (Jin 2020), the media representation of *fangyan* and their varieties has not yet been acknowledged as works of translation in the Chinese context. The discussion in the remainder of this article takes initial steps to fill this lacuna by delving further into the broader sociolinguistic domain of mediatisation. Expressively, language users as non-media social actors adopt "media's rules, aims, production logics, and constraints" (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999, 249) to tactically intersect symbolic and material spaces to examine and transform dominant linguistic, cultural, and medial infrastructures from within (Jansson 2013). This is typically evident in the audiovisual and textual representations of

fangyan and their varieties in the screen-based and metrolinguistic media illustrated in Section 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3.

3.1 Popular films

The first non-Putonghua Chinese-language film to be produced after 1949 was 抓壮丁 *Zhuazhuangding* 'The conscription' (Chen and Shen 1963). The characters in this film speak the local tongues of the Sichuan province, the south-western variation of *Guanhua*. *Fangyan* films did not gain popularity among the general audience until the early 2000s because of the stringent language policy (Ge 2012). The thriller 寻枪 *Xunqiang* 'Missing gun' (Lu 2002),[5] directed by Chuan Lu, marked the introduction of non-Putonghua films in mainstream cinema. Despite being critically acclaimed overseas, the film divided domestic critics. Official agencies criticised the film for countering national language policies by portraying a protagonist speaking the local tongue of Guizhou. Notwithstanding this, the film won support from Sanping Han, the head of the state-owned China Film Group at that time, who sponsored several domestic blockbusters and propagandist films, such as 建国大业 *Jianguodaye* 'The founding of the republic' (Huang and Han 2009). As Liu (2013, 216) argues, the local dialect is used for neither propagandist nor pedagogical purposes but for upholding "the cinematic spirit of amusement, thrills, excitement." This sentiment was followed by Hao Ning in creating his black comedy 疯狂的石头 *Fengkuangdeshitou* 'Crazy stone' (Ning 2006) — the highest-grossing domestic film in China in 2006. Ning ventured to present a multilingual context including several non-Putonghua Chinese languages and language varieties and stirred 方言热 *fangyanre* 'the *fangyan* fever'. This was escalated further by another domestic blockbuster film, 让子弹飞 *Rangzidanfei* 'Let the bullet fly' (Jiang 2010). The film was directed by the international award-winning Chinese director Wen Jiang, who also played one of the main characters. It was adapted from a short story written by Chinese writer Shitu Ma, whose works are mostly set in various parts of the Sichuan province in China. The film was initially produced in the local languages of the Sichuan province — which are variations of *Guanhua* — and released domestically along with a dubbed version in Putonghua. The director used the film to relocate the Spaghetti Western genre in a quasi-historical Chinese context and shared his insights on the roles of people, power, and revolution in Chinese society and history through witty dialogue and trans-historical, symbolic allusions (Van den Troost 2016). The prosodic variants depicted in the film further instigate forms of

5. See the interview in Chinese with Lu Chuan at http://ent.sina.com.cn/s/m/2002-05-14/83187.html. Last accessed on 11 October 2023.

mediatisation, in which vernacular speeches of Sichuan province are transformed from audiovisual performance into written communication.

3.2 Metrolinguistic textualisation

The nationwide frenzy around 让子弹飞 *Rangzidanfei* 'Let the bullet fly' (Jiang 2010) raised the popularity of the local tongues and culinary cultures of the Sichuan province in China and beyond and contributed to the normalisation of alternative Chinese textures in urban cultural life. Despite being experimental and peripheral to the dominant SWC discourse, the materialisation of *fangyan* in the metrolingual space reaffirms that "there is also a material aspect to the notions of space that are inherent in mediatisation as well as in the media 'textures' through which cultural practices and everyday life materialise" (Lundby 2014, 11).

One example can be found on the front page of the menu at Grandma's Noodle Shop in Melbourne.[6] On the left is a mixture of Simplified and Traditional Chinese characters to introduce a few buzzwords such as 重慶言子 *Chongqingyanzi* 'Chongqing talks'. Noticeably, the phrase is printed in Traditional Chinese characters with a bolder and larger type than the text positioned below it. This textual presentation visualises the meaning of vernacular speech, which would only be audible via the spoken medium, to the diverse (Chinese-)language users in Australia. On the right-hand side of that menu page, above the picture, the dialectal slang 巴适惨了 *bashicanle* is written in Simplified Chinese. The adjective 巴适 *bashi* means 'comfortable' or 'satisfied'. Next to it is the intensifier 惨了 *canle*, which means 'very' or 'extremely', equivalent to 非常 *feichang* or 极了 *jile* in Putonghua. In this menu, *bashicanle* is a promotional message that highlights the satisfaction, or even ecstasy, that the Chongqing noodle dishes bring to the customers. Notably, 惨了*canle* also appears in Putonghua usage but conveys negative feelings such as frustration, fear, or anxiety, based on the context in which it is used.

A further medium of metrolinguistic representation of *fangyan* is the prints on T-shirts. For example, the dialectal slang 乱劈才 is transliterated as *LUA PI CAI* and translated into Putonghua as 不讲规矩乱来 *bujiangguijulunanlai* 'disobedient and reckless'.[7] This illustration distorts the standard form of writing to establish the difference between the lingua franca and local speech. First, the transliteration bends the spelling principles of pinyin to draw out the dialectal

6. See https://www.aufomm.com/posts/from-city-of-mountains-to-coffee-captital-chongqing-noodles-in-cbd-taste-test/ (in Chinese). Last accessed on 12 August 2024.

7. See https://a.rimg.com.tw/s6/145/438/carry2020/f/5c/222308941361 56_758_m.jpg. Last accessed on 11 October 2023.

pronunciation, in which 乱 is marked as *LUA* instead of *luan*. Second, 劈才 (marked as *PI CAI* on the t-shirt) is derived from the Putonghua word 劈柴 *pichai* 'chopping firewood' to align the writing with the spoken word. In doing so, the local tongue is fully written in the non-standard collocation of SWC characters and pinyin transliteration.

3.3 Subtitling lyrics in *fangyan* and dialectal hip-hop music videos

Hip-hop music videos are text-heavy with rich audiovisual elements. They are a recent development in East Asia, particularly in China, considered the 'coolest' in popular culture and attracting thousands of creative grassroots musicians and artists. Dialectal hip-hop is one of the most-watched genres. We consider them typical examples of translingual and transcultural assemblage. Expressively, Chinese hip-hop musicians prefer to rap in their local vernaculars instead of Putonghua and tend to adopt non-standard forms of writing for subtitling lyrics. For example, the song 喝馄炖 *Hohunden* 'Drinking wonton soup' (D-Evil 2005) is composed in *Nanjinghua* 'Nanjing talk',[8] a dialectal variety of *Guanhua* that is spoken in Nanjing. It was the debut song of the hip-hop band D-Evil from Nanjing and was released in 2005 on the Bulletin Board System owned by one of the oldest Chinese-language social media sites *Xicihutong* launched in 1998; the website has undergone several changes of ownership since 2005 (Li 2020).

Most dialectal expressions included in the lyrics have no written equivalents in SWC, whereas even local speakers of *Nanjinghua* would have difficulty understanding its meaning owing to the rappers' use of slang and its strong association with the local youth culture. The song rips off the accompaniment of "The Real Slim Shady" (Eminem 2000), which was originally composed by the American rapper Eminem in 2000, and remixes it with *Nanjinghua* dialectal lyrics, which are subtitled in Simplified Chinese characters for the animated music video. The music video is a product of textual poaching, in which active media users (fans) strip commercial cultural products of their original meanings and transmigrate them into new contexts of social interaction for critical reinterpretation, revaluation, and transformation (Jenkins 2013). Recent research has also emphasised the capacity of textual poachers in the media arena to cross institutional boundaries to search for creative and critical transformations in sociocultural domains (Hermes and Hill 2021).

Without subtitles, the semantic meaning of the lyrics and the local youth culture they describe can escape the audience's understanding. The creators of the music video cognitively and affectively orchestrate multimodal resources with-

8. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7QHi6Ywdpw. Last accessed on 11 October 2023.

out regard for socially and politically enforced norms. Conversely, viewers are exposed to fragmented and unassimilated linguistic contexts in which the monolithic discourse of 'the Chinese language' dissolves into the mediatised textures of sociospatial interactions, as illustrated in Example (1) to (4).

(1) 我们不用筷子不用挑子
Women buyong kuaizi byyong tiaozi
'We don't use chopsticks, neither spoon' (D-Evil 2005, 1:27)

Without any knowledge of *Nanjinghua*, viewers would not be able to understand what 挑子 *tiaozi* means, as it is the vernacular equivalent of the Putonghua word 勺子 *shaozi* 'spoon', which had no widely circulated written form until the release of this music video.

(2) 乖乖一个漂亮盘西嘛
Guaiguai yig piaoliang panxi man
'Wow! Look! A hot girl there!' (ibid., 1:58)

The word 盘西 *panxi* was created on the streets of Nanjing in the late 1990s, when teenaged boys would chat with each other about their (imaginary) girlfriends in their coded language. The word spread quickly across diverse public spaces and was heard outside school gates, in restaurants, at work, on television, and on social media.

(3) 哎油，瞟你带
Aiyou piaolidai
'Bazinga! I was mocking you' (ibid., 2:00)

The meaning of 哎油 *aiyou* varies across contexts. This expression functions similarly to the catchphrase 'Bazinga!' used by Sheldon Cooper — one of the protagonists of the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (Cendrowski 2007–2019). The two words share the common pragmatic function of celebrating a successful prank by the speaker aimed at a close friend. The sentence 瞟你带 *piaolidai* contains two dialectal terms: the slang expression 瞟 *piao*, implying 'mock(ing)' or 'tease (or teasing)', and the modifier 带 *dai*, which is an abbreviation of the two-character modifier 的哎 *deai*.

(4) 向
Xiang
'[Salute] to'
无敌，来丝的南京话
Wudilaiside nanjinghua
'The invincible, nice Nanjinghua'
还有南京市井文化致敬

Haiyou Nanjingshijinwenhua zhijing
'And the street cultures of Nanjing'
我爱这座城市
Woaizhezuochengshi
'I love this city'
我爱这座城市所有的人
Woaizhezuochengshisuoyouderen
'I love everyone who lives in this city'
还有
Haiyou
'And'
我爱我家街道的
Woaiwojiajiedaode
'I love my street which has'
馄饨摊
Hundentan
'a wonton soup vendor' (ibid., 4:07)

This message appears at the end of the video. Noticeably, 来丝 *laisi* is coined using Simplified Chinese characters to the spoken loan word, which has its origins in the English word 'nice'.

In the *Hohunden* music video, language no longer constitutes an innate cognitive capacity for representation and choosing between language items. Instead, language denotes a midway point in "an external environment in which we [they] are collectively immersed with the other members of our [their] community" (Citton 2019, 59). This is not to displace language from human beings and the human brain but to explore the different relationships that language can have with "a greater totality of interacting objects, places, and alternative forms of semiosis" (Pennycook 2018, 55). Conversely, as a "Work-as-Assemblage" (Hayles 2005), translation transcends the target–source divide to maintain a nexus of equal partnerships. Ascending from the translation–original spectrum into the fluid realm of repertoires, "everything is simultaneously a translation of everything else, each united to the others in a rhizomatic network without a clear beginning or end" (Hayles 2005, 115). Thus, translation constantly assembles the dispersed meaning-in-making to concomitantly construct and distribute a transformative work which occurs within a translational mind but simultaneously turns outward to engage with the sociocultural domains of mediatisation.

3.4 Discussion

Pennycook (2018) maintains that language is as much "embodied, embedded, extended and enacted" (48) as being socially "extended, distributed, and situated" (52). Thus, the understanding of assemblage stakes more on the relations between languages and cultures than on the distinction between physical and virtual interactions and between paper-based and screen-based communication. It is crucial to expand the notion of repertoire beyond different linguistic, polysemiotic, and multisensory resources to envisage how language is distributed spatially. By including "spatial repertoires," distributed language treats physical surroundings as a "part of an interactive whole" (ibid., 53), where translation and translanguaging co-function spatially to re-orient communication by intersecting the body and its physical surroundings.

The non-standard writings illustrated in this section are part of the mediatised assemblage, whose visualisation of the spoken remains chaotic, complicated, and less-familiar. In particular, the subtitles demonstrate the critical capacity of language users to transcend the existing social constructions of Putonghua and SWC writing to visualise what may otherwise be unwritable. The co-creation of the music video actualises "elements from a locally situated ensemble of linguistic possibilities" (Krause 2021, 32) by navigating "back and forth, not between a first and second language, but between heterogeneity and homogeneity" (35). Language users as content creators manoeuvre across the national, dialectal, and idiolectal languages and in the sociolinguistic and sociospatial interactions to engage with communicative and spatial repertoires. Individually, a language user's repertoire operates as a "virtual spectrum of linguistic and non-linguistic resources drawn from different languages, language varieties, registers, discourses, modes, and media at one's disposal" (Lee 2022, 127).

The subtitles illustrated above orchestrate diverse and complex linguistic resources and enmesh them with other means of communication such as gestures, dressing styles, and postures for effective communication with the communities that they are associated with in their everyday life. As Section 4 will explicate, this can lead to a broader assemblage of meaning- and sense-making resources beyond language, where media textures function effectively under translanguaging to spread critical commentary in the local hip-hop community and beyond.

4. Translanguaging subtitles of Chongqing talk in a hip-hop music video

Language users tend to identify the homophony between Simplified Chinese characters and *fangyan* speech. Subtitling can navigate diverse individual and

shared repertoires to assemble linguistic, semiotic, and technological resources into sporadic processes of knowledge revaluation involving the subtitler and target audience. This can bring about a shift from referential correspondence to the multimodal, multisensory, and intersemiotic dimensions of language use, in which the act of subtitling unfolds as an embodied event, as conceived by Pérez-González (2012, 348):

> Subtitles are acts, events, happenings, and they should not be primarily evaluated according to their referentiality or degree of correspondence with pre-existent meaning or communicative intentions, but on the basis of their affective contribution to the materiality of audiovisual texts and their transformational impact on the audience's experience of self-mediated textualities.

Bearing this in mind, we turn to a diss rap to highlight how social and medial surroundings become part of the spatial repertoire and distributed language of bilingual subtitles. In popular communication, 'diss' refers to disrespectful and contemptuous actions and articulations targeting a specific person. This is manifested in hip-hop culture as a duel between two rappers. The rap song 有一个土火 *Youyigetuhuo* 'There is a redneck' (Da 2019)[9] has been composed and performed in the Chongqing dialect — a variety of south-western *Guanhua* in the Sichuan province. The rapper known as *Dabiaoshu* 'Master Da' or 'MD', who is considered the godfather of Chongqing rap, worked with his associate *Lichade* 'Richard' to take on the leading Chinese rapper GAI (i.e., Yan Zhou), who spoke of MD contemptuously on social media.

In the diss rap song, MD criticises GAI's inauthentic use of the Chongqing talk and his ungrateful and contemptuous attitude towards senior members of the local hip-hop community, whose support gave him nationwide popularity. Noticeably, bilingual captions appear in the beginning of the music video to display the song's title as 有一个土火 *Youyigetuhuo* and its English translation 'There's a redneck' (Da 2019, 0:02). The word 土火 *tuhuo* means the same as 土货 *tuhuo* and refers to those who are ignorant and unsophisticated. In comparison, 'redneck' is more culture-specific, often associated with a southern United States working-class white person who is politically reactionary. The Chinese and English parts of the subtitles should be read as a coherent, dialogical whole rather than as a juxtaposition of source and target texts. This is also reflected in the two-line subtitles that render the lyrics with a mixture of homophonous Simplified Chinese characters, Romanised transliteration, with images in the first line and an English rendition in the second.

9. Available at https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV10J411R7tk/. Last accessed on 11 October 2023.

For example, the rapper MD addresses the younger hip-hop musicians (and specifically GAI) as *xiaojiershi* 'excrements of little chickens' (translated as 'little bastard' in the bilingual subtitle) (ibid., 0:25), which is not a common curse word in Chongqing. The dialectal insult is illustrated as in Figure 1, which makes the intended meaning ambiguous, as it jeopardises clarity in the monolithic linguistic sense of written language.

Figure 1. *Xiaojiershi* as shown in the subtitle

For subtitling, the combination with 'r' takes less space on the screen than the SWC characters 鸡儿 *jier*. From a translanguaging perspective, 'r' as an English letter is phonetically similar to the pronunciation of 儿 *er* and can simultaneously be read as the initial consonants of the pinyin transliteration of 日 *ri* — an equivalent to 'fuck'. Collectively, the linguistic and multimodal resources creatively intensify the spoken insult when compared with the written characters that they substitute. The English translation 'little bastard' reverberates the pragmatic function of the lyric, which weighs imperatively on GAI, the state-endorsed rapper, forcing him back into the hierarchical milieu, wherein MD maintains his superior position as a senior rapper. This transgressive speech act takes on the discursive power of the Chinese cultural industry.

Tensions persist in Chinese hip-hop culture between those who (are bound to) join the mainstream creative industry for wealth and fame and those who remain underground and unaffiliated despite the precarity faced in everyday life. The authorities have criticised hip-hop as vulgar, subversive, and inappropriate and therefore claimed that it must be sanitised. Co-opting this governmental agenda, popular rappers like GAI and GEM (i.e., Baoshi Dong), among other celebrities in the Chinese cultural industry, have deliberately modified their works to suit the party-state's cultural expectations, thereby becoming new propagandists in post-socialist China. They lend their creativity to the government's ideological works to help it win greater popular consent and therefore reinforce the current leadership's position (Perry 2017). In return, they can access state-owned resources (e.g., performing at the Chinese New Year Gala broadcast nationwide on the Chinese Central Television network or being cultural ambassadors on

behalf of governmental organisations) and utilise them to aggregate their cultural capital and enhance their commercial value in the fiercely competitive entertainment industry (Xu and Yang 2021).

In addition to his influence on the local hip-hop community, MD is a successful entrepreneur who owns a production line of the popular beverage 东杏凉茶 *Dongxingliangcha* 'Dongxing herbal tea'. The dual identity allows him to aggregate economic and social capital to maintain his artistic autonomy and critical voice under the party-state's governance of popular culture. This is illustrated by a snippet from the music video where a pastiche is created to mock GAI's performing skills. As MD sings 二天当了影帝 老子送你一张锦旗 *Ertian dangleyingdi laozi songni yizhangjinqi* (Da 2019, 3:04; the English subtitle reads: "When you win Best Actor, I will hand you a silk banner personally"), the real-person footage transforms into a surrealistic animation. The dialectal expression 二天 *ertian* can be understood as 'two days' if read verbatim and based on the literal meanings of the two characters. The actual meaning is equivalent to 有一天 *youyitian* 'one day' in Putonghua. In addition, the phrase 一张锦旗 *yizhangjinqi* 'a silk banner' is ungrammatical by the standards of SWC, based on which 锦旗 *jinqi* 'silk banner' should be allocated with 面 *mian* and not 张 *zhang*. As nominal classifiers, 面 *mian* is often associated with flat objects such as mirrors and flags, while 张 *zhang* is used for lightweight flat objects such as paper, photos, and bedsheets. By using 张 *zhang*, the rapper demonstrates spite towards GAI and indicates the silk banner is insignificant and superficial. For domestic users of SWC and Putonghua, as well as learners of Chinese as a foreign or heritage language, the distinctive meanings and usage of the two characters are cognitively routinised in various aspects of everyday language practice.

MD's posture connects the bilingual subtitle to a silk banner displayed on the left, embroidered with the message appearing at 3:06 shown in Example (5).

(5) 赠周延同志
Zeng Zhou Yan tongzhi
'To Comrade Yan Zhou'
爆款演员
Baokuanyanyuan
'Top-notch actor'
德艺双馨
Deyishuangxin
'Renowned for both professional excellence and moral integrity'
2019年11月初
2019nian 11yuechu
'Early November 2019'

In Chinese socialist tradition, the authorities award model workers silk banners as trophies to honour their achievements and contributions. The message written on such banners must be formal and idiomatic; that is, it cannot include cyber talk and popular slang such as 爆款 *baokuan* 'top-notch'. The couplet on the screen juxtaposes 爆款演员 *baokuanyanyuan* 'a top-notch actor' with the party-state's guideline for the moral conduct of celebrities, 德艺双馨 *deyishuangxin* 'dual achievements of professional excellence and moral integrity'. This visual–verbal interaction assists MD's performative body language in expressing himself politically and interdiscursively across written and spoken modes.

These examples show that subtitles are a part of the message rather than its medium of transmission to another language. They constitute the meaning- and sense-making resources assembled by MD and his fellow creators to instrumentalise the language and ideological practices maintained by different authoritative domains. Interdiscursively, they diss-articulate the asymmetry of power in online and offline sociospatial interactions to circumvent the political apparatus that supresses hip-hop and other popular-culture practices in the wider society in which they live. In sum, the subtitle communicates the meaning of the lyrics; the mediatised MD poses to link the subtitle to the mimetic trophy that combines institutional and everyday discourses; the rap, subtitled lyrics, mediated body, and visual pastiche converge to speak the emerging language on screen. This co-functioning instantiates how translanguaging as an intersemiotic and interdiscursive assemblage instigates the narrativity and criticality of subtitling. In line with this, the concluding section presents a practical proposal on translanguaging subtitles of *fangyan*-based cinematic textures.

5. Conclusions

This article has shown that *fangyan* can be written in what we propose here as translanguaging subtitles. Although no consensus has been reached for filmmaking, new practices are emerging from digital and metrolingual spaces, in which creative workers and everyday language users are transgressively reformulating writing in Simplified Chinese characters. Translanguaging has the following implications for the subtitling of the mediatised articulation of *fangyan*. First, to maximise the comprehensibility of translanguaging subtitles, the subtitler may adopt the same layout as displayed in the *fangyan* T-shirt mentioned in Section 3.2, where the emergent writing in dialectal expressions is inserted between the pinyin transliteration on the top and the Putonghua equivalent at the bottom. The proposed layout obviously contrasts with the two-line maximum rule in the Western subtitling tradition (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2021). That

said, subtitling has not been comprehensively standardised in the Chinese and broader Asian contexts. The absence of formalisation encourages rather than hinders local and transregional subtitlers, artists, and media producers to apply and experiment with more creative, and sometimes unconventional (compared with Western standards), approaches to screen translation. For instance, Singlish (Singaporean English) subtitles often appear in multiple lines to elaborate the multilingual and translanguaging articulations in English, Simplified Chinese, and a community language based on the filmmaker's choosing (Kuo 2022). Singlish subtitles include bracketed notes to explain specific cultural references and slang expressions that are not widely accessible beyond the depicted speech communities. Malaysian musician Namewee adopts three-line subtitles in his music videos to render the lyrics in Chinese, English, and Malay in an idiolectic manner to reflect his diasporic habitus. These and other indigenous subtitling phenomena are prominent in the inter-Asian media geography but remain marginal to wider transnational media exchanges.

On a practical note, it would be helpful to provide information about the Chinese languages and language varieties used in film dialogue and the regions where they are spoken in the real-world context before the film narrative begins. This information can appear in the middle of the screen. If more than one *fangyan* language is used, subtitles for the original dialogue may also show the names of those *fangyan* languages and their varieties. Information can be presented in brackets and placed next to the translation of the corresponding original dialogue. In translating dialogue, a subtitler may search for potential solutions by looking beyond the vocabulary and usage of Putonghua and the principles outlined in 语法修辞讲话 *Yufaxiucijianghua* 'Lectures on grammar and rhetoric' (Lü and Zhu 1951). Instead, subtitlers may follow the alternative writing found in popular culture discourse to preserve or imitate the authentic tones and pronunciations of dialogue. In doing so, they may also need to identify the SWC characters pronounced in a similar manner in the corresponding *fangyan* speeches. When such homonymous characters are unavailable, the articulation can be illustrated using pinyin and non-verbal symbolic resources.

Future research can further verify the applicability and appreciation of translanguaging subtitles in the relevant production and reception contexts. In particular, empirical reception studies may help examine (a) the translanguaging writing strategies that are applicable to the subtitling of audiovisual fiction (e.g., feature films and television drama); (b) how viewers cope with the multimodal ensemble of translanguaging subtitles as reflected by their reading speed and patterns, and to what extent this is affected by other cognitive efforts and mental movements triggered by the media objects at play; and (c) how viewers interpret the meanings of translanguaging subtitles and evaluate the subtitled version's

descriptive adequacy and communicational effectiveness. Findings from such research may support the theorisation and development of practical guidelines for translating audiovisual multilingualism and its integration into the storytelling habitus of culture creators.

Finally, translanguaging subtitles deprivilege hegemonic languages in the national and global media spheres to improve the translatability of non-hegemonic (and minority) languages from speech into writing. This may help future audiovisual production engage deeply with authentic performances in non-hegemonic languages without the interference of translation. Non-translation may open new pathways for subtitling researchers and practitioners to participate in broader multilingual transformations in the arts, civic engagement, and popular communication.

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