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Navigating Sociolinguistic Settings:
Translating Wei Zhou's *The Hidden Mother Tongue* for Cross-Cultural Understanding

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Introduction

The Hidden Mother Tongue [隐蔽的母语] by Wei Zhou [维舟], is a poignant exploration of contemporary China's linguistic identity and a subtle expose on cultural assimilation there. Wei Zhou was born in Miaozhen, Chongming Island, Shanghai. He brings a deeply personal perspective to this essay, which was originally published on Wei's official WeChat account. As a distinguished Chinese writer and book reviewer, Wei's writing offers nuanced remarks on the interplay of regional dialects, social mobility, and urbanity in Shanghai.

Wei Zhou's deeply personal essay, recounts his experiences navigating the linguistic landscape of Shanghai as a native speaker of the Chongming dialect. Through a series of revealing encounters – most notably a conversation with a taxi driver who makes disparaging remarks about Chongming people without knowing Wei is a concealed Chongming native – Wei explores how dialect speakers often hide their linguistic identity to avoid discrimination. The essay weaves together several narrative threads: a female taxi driver's prejudice against Chongming drivers, the author's own experiences of dialect concealment, and observations of how his high school classmates gradually abandoned their mother tongue in favour of Shanghainese. Wei draws parallels between the Chongming people's linguistic assimilation and similar phenomena among other marginalized groups in Shanghai, particularly migrants from the northern Jiangsu province. The essay concludes with a poignant comparison with Studio Ghibli's *Pom Poko*, suggesting that like the tanuki who must transform into humans to survive in the modern world, dialect speakers must suppress their true linguistic identity to thrive in urban Shanghai, finding freedom only in moments when they can return to their mother tongue.

Wei's background as a native of Chongming Island lends authenticity and depth to his observations. He is a graduate of the department of journalism and communication at Xiamen University, and he has established himself as a leading figure in Chinese literary circles, especially in online literary circles. His contributions as a columnist and book reviewer for highly influential publications such as *Southern Metropolis Daily* and *The Economic Observer* have cemented his reputation as an acute observer of Chinese society and culture.

The importance of "The Hidden Mother Tongue" is heightened when viewed alongside Wei's larger corpus, such as his popular writings about his hometown of Chongming Island. This particular essay can be understood as part of a much larger narrative that Wei has been fashioning about regional identity and the impacts of rapid urbanization and cultural homogenization on linguistic heritage.

In the context of Chinese literature, "The Hidden Mother Tongue" forms part of a growing corpus challenging the idea of Chinese identity understood in monolithic terms. It brings to the forefront the experiences of marginalized linguistic communities within the broader Chinese cultural sphere, a theme that resonates with global discussions on language preservation and cultural diversity. This perspective is further developed in Wei's published works, such as *A Foot in Postmodernity* [一只脚踏进后现代] (2020), *Island Without Shore* [无岸之岛] (2019), and *All the Rivers on the Earth* [大地上所有的河流] (2014), with each work offering a rich exploration of contemporary Chinese society and culture.

The essay can be read against the backdrop of Shanghai's rapid urbanization and the influx of a rising number of migrants from surrounding regions; in such a context, understanding these social dynamics has become very important. As China's economic powerhouse, Shanghai has long been a magnet for internal migrants seeking better opportunities. However, this type of domestic migration has, in turn, led to tangled social hierarchies based on origin and linguistic background. It is against this backdrop that Wei examines the Chongming dialect speakers as representatives of these broader societal tensions. In doing so, he draws on his personal encounters and observations as an individual who has navigated these linguistic and cultural divides.

This essay is particularly challenging to translate because of the depth of its roots in Chinese cultural and linguistic realities. There are several references to local dialects, cultural practices, and social norms that have no direct equivalents in English cultures. The essay also makes use of personal anecdotes and reflections, creating an intimate tone that should be carefully preserved during translation.

In approaching this translation, I have adopted Venuti's concepts of foreignization and domestication while being guided by Skopos theory as developed by Vermeer. While Venuti argues for foreignization as a way to preserve cultural difference (*Translator's Invisibility* 23-25), I recognize that the complex linguistic and cultural elements in Wei's essay – particularly those involving dialect discrimination and social dynamics – require a more nuanced approach. Therefore, I align with Nord's concept of "function plus loyalty" (126), which advocates maintaining fidelity to the source text while ensuring the translation fulfils its intended function for the target audience. This approach allows for what Eco terms "negotiation" in translation (6, 43, 63), where certain cultural elements are preserved while others are adapted to ensure comprehensibility.

Specifically, in line with Toury's notion of translation norms (55-65), I have sought to balance what he terms "adequacy" (adherence to source text norms) with "acceptability" (adherence to target culture norms). This is particularly relevant when handling dialect representation and culture-specific references in Wei's essay. As Baker suggests in her discussion of equivalence at different levels, I have employed various strategies to achieve both semantic and pragmatic equivalence, ensuring that the cultural and social implications of language use in the source text are effectively conveyed to English readers.

This commentary aims to provide insight into the specific challenges encountered in the translation process and the strategies developed to address them. It is grounded in these theoretical frameworks and contributes to the broader discourse on translating contemporary Chinese literature.

Translation Challenges and Strategies

1. Navigating Dialectal Variations and Sociolinguistic Features
One of the primary challenges in translating "The Hidden Mother Tongue" lies in effectively conveying the linguistic diversity that forms the essay's thematic core. The text features multiple Chinese language varieties, including Shanghai dialect (Shanghainese), Chongming dialect, and Mandarin, each carrying distinct social and cultural connotations. This multilingual complexity presents what Hatim and Mason term "socio-textual practices" (15-19), where language varieties index social identity and power relations.

I have followed Toury's concept of adequacy versus acceptability norms, and have adopted a balanced approach that preserves the sociolinguistic significance of dialect differences while ensuring comprehensibility for English readers. This was manifest in several

specific translation strategies, particularly when handling dialect-specific expressions and accent representations.

For instance, the taxi driver's use of the insult "崇蟹" (Chong ha, which literally means Chongming crabs) presents a particularly complex translation challenge that exemplifies what Venuti, drawing on Lecercle's work, terms the "remainder" (*Scandals of Translation* 9-11)– those linguistic elements that resist standardization and reveal language's socially situated nature. Aixelá's concept of "extratextual gloss"(62), led me to retain the insult in its original form, accompanied by an explanation of its linguistic significance:

> *Source Text: 这句骂辞我还是第一次听见，不过立刻就明白是专骂崇明人的 ﹣﹣ 因为崇明方言著名的特征和笑柄之一是 ″啥″ 和 ″蟹″ 谐音。*

> *Translation: This was my first encounter with this particular insult, but I instantly understood it was directed at someone from Chongming Island – famous in part because their dialect makes the words for "what(sha)" and "crab(ha)" sound alike.*

This approach allows the reader to "hear" the original dialect while understanding its meaning and significance. Moreover, I have intentionally included the Chinese pronunciations "sha" for "what" and "ha" for "crab" in parentheses, making it easier for English readers to recognize and understand their phonetic similarities, particularly in the latter syllable, "ha".

For more nuanced accent distinctions, I implemented what Newmark terms "descriptive equivalence" (1988, 83-84), using metalinguistic commentary instead of attempting to reproduce features of any given accent in English. This aligns with Nord's "function plus loyalty" principle, maintaining fidelity to the source text's meaning while adapting a form enabling target audience comprehension. For instance, when the female taxi driver comments on Wei speaking Shanghainese without an accent, the translation becomes particularly complex:

> *Source Text: "那你上海话一点也听不出来口音。" 她笑了笑说："侬到底混得好呀！"*

> *Translation: "Well, your Shanghainese has no trace of an accent". She grinned and remarked in Shanghainese, "You've really made something of yourself, haven't you!"*

This example presents multiple translation challenges that required careful theoretical consideration. The Shanghainese pronoun "nong" (侬) serves as a crucial dialect marker distinguishing it from the Mandarin "ni" (你). If I were to follow Toury's concept of adequate translation, preserving this dialectal distinction would be important for source text fidelity. However, when applying Nord's functional approach (80-93), I recognized that attempting to find an English dialectal equivalent for "nong" would risk introducing unintended cultural associations. Instead, I opted for what Newmark terms a compensatory strategy (1988, 90), preserving the dialect shift through metalinguistic commentary ("remarked in Shanghainese") while using the standard English "you" for the actual pronoun. This approach maintains the sociolinguistic significance of the code-switching without risking misrepresentation of the source culture's linguistic dynamics.

The idiomatic expression "混得好" (literally: "mixed well") presents a related challenge, carrying connotations of social advancement that required careful rendering in English. Following Baker's principle of pragmatic equivalence (230-63), I chose "made something of yourself" as an equivalent English idiom that captures both the colloquial tone and the implied social mobility. This solution aligns with Nord's loyalty principle by preserving the pragmatic function of the original while ensuring cultural appropriateness for the target audience.

For dialect-specific expressions deeply embedded in local culture, I also opted for what Venuti terms a "minoritizing translation" strategy (1998,10), retaining the original form with explanation to preserve its cultural specificity while ensuring comprehension. For example, when handling the Chongming dialect term "沙上人", the translation of:

Source Text: 甚至讲着同样方言的海门、启东人，在我小时候还被归为"沙上人"而受鄙视。

becomes:

Translation: Even those from Haimen and Qidong, who spoke the same dialect, were disparaged as "Shashangren" (sand dwellers) and looked down upon during my childhood.

In this translation, I preserved the Chongming dialect term through romanization ("Shashangren"), while providing its meaning ("sand dwellers", literally: "people in the sand") in parentheses. This minoritizing approach resists complete domestication by keeping the original dialect term visible, while the parenthetical explanation ensures comprehensibility for English readers. The strategy allows the translation to highlight the distinct linguistic features of the Chongming dialect while conveying the dialect term's sociocultural connotations as pejorative.

These kinds of approaches to handling dialectal variations and their associated linguistic features reflect Eco's concept of translation as negotiation, where decisions must balance multiple competing demands, that of preserving linguistic authenticity, maintaining readability, and conveying social significance. The goal throughout has been to achieve what Newmark terms "functional equivalence" (1988, 83), where the target text fulfils its communicative purpose while respecting the source text's cultural and linguistic complexity.

2. Culture-Specific Concepts and Sociocultural Implications

The essay presents numerous culture-specific concepts that require what Aixelá terms "culture-specific items" (CSIs) (56-60). These are textual elements whose function and connotations present translation challenges due to the cultural gap between source and target contexts. Here, I followed Leppihalme's framework for handling "cultural bumps" in translation "[…] for a situation where the reader of a TT has a problem understanding a source-cultural allusion. Such an allusion may well fail to function in the TT, as it is not part of the TL reader's culture" (4), and Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignization, uses various strategies to address these challenges while maintaining textual coherence. These strategies were calibrated according to what Hatim and Mason term "social distance" (18) – translation choices reflect the power dynamics and social relationships between text producers and receivers. This framework is particularly relevant when handling culturally-specific terms that carry complex social implications.

A prime example of CSI handling involves the concept of "上海人" (literally: "Shanghainese people"), an example of what Florin terms a "cultural realia" (122-28) – a term carrying complex connotations of local identity, social status, and cultural belonging that resists simple translation. I drew on Nord's instrumental translation approach (50-52) and rendered the phrase "上海人" 的身份和纯洁性 as "the identity and 'purity' of being 'from Shanghai'" to capture its complex implications fully. This sentence thus translates as follows:

Source Text: 因为只有对这些人来说，"上海人" 的身份和纯洁性才特别值得捍卫。

Translation: To them, the identity and "purity" of being "from Shanghai" are particularly sacrosanct.

I avoided the direct translation to "Shanghai people" because, officially, Chongming is part of Shanghai, and its inhabitants are also technically "Shanghai people". I also refrained from using "Shanghainese" to denote "Shanghai people" since this term is reserved for describing the Shanghai dialect in this translation. Moreover, a critical implication here is that individuals from Chongming Island or other regional areas are perceived as not truly "from Shanghai".

For elements less central to the overarching themes, I employed domestication to improve readability. For example, "拆迁" (chai qian, literally: "demolish and relocate") was translated as "urban renewal", following what Toury terms "norms of acceptability" (56-57) to provide a concept more readily understood by English speakers while preserving the essential meaning.

Conversely, for terms with rich cultural implications, I applied what Aixelá terms "intratextual gloss" (62)– the strategy of embedding explanatory elements within the text itself. A prime example is the translation of "老江湖" (lao Jianghu):

Source Text: 这个老江湖既不惊讶，也不道歉，甚至没有尴尬。

becomes:

Translation: The veteran driver, seasoned in the ways of city life, showed neither surprise nor apology, not even embarrassment.

Here, the intratextual gloss "seasoned in the ways of city life" is woven into the translation itself, helping readers understand the cultural connotations of "江湖" (jianghu) – a term that traditionally refers to the realm of martial arts and travelling adventurers in Chinese folklore and historical narratives, suggesting a complex subculture of honour and survival. In line with Baker's concept of pragmatic equivalence, I expanded the translation to include both the practical meaning ("veteran driver") and the cultural implications ("seasoned in the ways of city life") while maintaining textual fluency. This approach allows readers to grasp both the literal and metaphorical meanings without requiring a footnote or separate explanation.

While Wei's original text does not include footnotes, I made a strategic decision aligned with Appiah's concept of "thick translation"(817) and Aixelá' approach of "extratexutal gloss" (62) again – providing cultural context through explanatory additions. This decision reflects what Venuti describes as the translator's ethical responsibility to mediate cultural difference. For complex cultural concepts like "土八路" (Eighth Route Army), I added footnotes to explain the relevant historical context without disrupting the narrative flow. Similarly, for geographic references – such as Huaihai Road, Qidong, or Sanlin – I employed what Pedersen terms "specification" as the added material may be part of the sense or connotations of the Extralinguistic Cultural Reference (ECR) (43, 161-62) through footnotes, providing background geographical information that helps readers understand these locations' relationships with Shanghai and Chongming. This strategy aligns with Tymoczko's view that translators must often expand the target text to convey cultural information implicit in the source text (259-64).

This multi-layered approach to handling culture-specific elements reflects Eco's concept of negotiation in translation, balancing the need for cultural authenticity with reader

comprehension. The varied strategies – from domestication to thick translation – work together to ensure that China-specific historical and social phenomena, particularly the complex relationships between urban centres and surrounding rural areas, are effectively conveyed to the target audience with their cultural significance also preserved.

3. Preserving Stylistic Features and Authorial Voice

The stylistic richness of "The Hidden Mother Tongue" presents what Boase-Beier terms "cognitive stylistics" (74-82) challenges – where the author's linguistic choices reflect both conscious artistic decisions and cultural thought patterns. Wei's style interweaves personal reflection, sociological observation, and elements of humour, requiring what Reiss classifies as an "expressive" translation approach that prioritizes aesthetic equivalence, described by Reiss as "In texts of the expressive type, priority is given to equivalence at aesthetic text-composition level and to form-focused language use" (142). This is manifest in careful attention to the author's distinctive voice and stylistic devices.

Following Newmark's principles of communicative translation (1980, 39), which emphasizes preserving the effect of the source text on its readers, I maintained Wei's rhetorical questions as key devices for reader engagement. For example:

Source text: 大概很少有人把讲崇明话当作一个原则问题吧？

Translation: Presumably, few regard speaking the Chongming dialect as a matter of principle?

Here, the rhetorical marker "吧" and its questioning tone are preserved through the adverb "presumably" and the question mark, maintaining both the interrogative form and the author's subtle scepticism. Similarly:

Source text: 那你觉得我是哪里的？

Translation: So, where do you think I'm from?

This preservation of rhetorical devices aligns with House's concept of "overt translation" (54), which maintains the visibility of the source text's original features, to 'to remain as intact as possible given the necessary transfer and recoding in another language' (55-56). The conversational tone and direct reader address are deliberately kept preserving the author's engagement strategy.

The essay's tonal variations present what Hatim and Mason term "text act" variations (30-4, 119-33) – shifts in communicative function that require different translation approaches. This is particularly evident in passages that move between personal narrative and social commentary. For instance, when translating memories of dialect discrimination:

Source text: 自小到大，电台里常有针对崇明方言的滑稽戏段落 – – 不过我一直没意识到这是"种族玩笑"。

Translation: When I was growing up Growing up, radio shows frequently aired comedy sketches that mocked the Chongming dialect – though I never recognized these as "ethnic jokes".

Here, I employed what House calls "covert translation", where the target text functions as an original in the target culture while maintaining the source text's effect. This involved:
- Rendering the temporal phrase "自小到大" as the idiomatic English expression "When I was growing up"

- Using the en dash to replicate the reflective pause in the original
- Maintaining consistent use of the past tense to convey the historical nature of the experience
- Preserving the quotation marks around "种族玩笑"/"ethnic jokes" to highlight the term's significance

These choices work together to maintain what Boase-Beier identifies as the cognitive aspects of style – the way language choices reflect thought patterns and cultural perspectives (98-100).

Next, I drew on Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, which posits that metaphors structure how we understand abstract concepts through concrete experiences (48-54), to preserve Wei's original metaphorical expressions where they carried similar conceptual significance in both cultures. For example:

Source text: 那就像是随身携带的一片故土，有着与生俱来的亲切和安心。

Translation: It's akin to carrying a piece of homeland, providing an innate sense of familiarity and comfort.

This metaphor works effectively in translation because it builds on what Kövecses terms shared "bodily experience" (2005) that can serve as basis for metaphorical understanding across cultures. The physical experience of 'carrying'(携带) and spatial relationships provides a concrete foundation that both Chinese and English speakers can map onto abstract concepts of cultural identity and emotional connection. As Kövecses argues, such shared bodily experiences allow for metaphorical conceptualizations that can work across linguistic boundaries when the experiential basis is similarly understood in both cultures. This enables the metaphorical mapping of 'homeland' as portable object to resonate effectively in both Chinese and English, maintaining both the figurative expression and its emotional impact.

I applied a similar approach to Wei's extended metaphor comparing dialect speakers to the tanuki in *Pom Poko*:

Source text: 就像宫崎骏的动画《百变狸猫》里那样，狸猫们最终敌不过坚持都市开发的人类，结局是他们不得不变化为人类，同样在都市里谋生，只不过对他们来说，一起变回狸猫时，才是自由的一刻。

Translation: This is reminiscent of Hayao Miyazaki's animated film Pom Poko, where the tanuki (raccoon dogs) are ultimately unable to withstand the humans' push for urban development. In the end, they have no choice but to transform into humans and adapt to city life. For them, however, the moments when they can revert to being tanuki together represent their true freedom.

This metaphor employs what Lakoff and Johnson term a "structural metaphor" (14), where one concept (linguistic assimilation) is systematically structured in terms of another (physical transformation). The metaphor works because it maps:

- Physical transformation → linguistic adaptation
- Urban development → cultural homogenization
- True form → authentic identity
- Collective reversion → shared linguistic heritage

By maintaining these metaphorical mappings in translation, the text preserves both the cognitive framework and the emotional resonance of the original while remaining accessible to the target audience.

Cross-Cultural Impact and Concluding Reflections
The translation of "The Hidden Mother Tongue" serves as both a bridge for cross-cultural understanding and a case study in translating contemporary Chinese literature. Through systematic application of contemporary translation theories and careful attention to cultural nuance, this project demonstrates how translation can illuminate complex social dynamics that resonate beyond specific cultural contexts while maintaining cultural authenticity.

A. Synthesis of Translation Strategies
The translation process revealed several key insights that contribute to the broader field of translation studies:

Cultural Mediation and Theoretical Application
The implementation of Venuti's foreignization strategy, particularly in handling dialect terms like "Chong ha" and "Shashangren", demonstrates how cultural specificity can be preserved while ensuring comprehensibility. Meanwhile, Nord's "function plus loyalty" approach proved essential in balancing source text fidelity with target audience accessibility. And finally, Eco's concept of negotiation guided decisions about when to retain Chinese elements and when to provide contextual explanations.

Linguistic Strategy Innovation
The treatment of dialect interplay required developing a hybrid approach that combines (i) the transliteration of key dialectal terms, (ii) metalinguistic commentary to convey sociolinguistic significance, and (iii) strategic use of footnotes for cultural-historical context.
This approach extends beyond the traditional foreignization–domestication binary, suggesting new possibilities for handling multilingual texts.

Cultural–Universal Dynamic
The translation demonstrates how Toury's concept of adequate-acceptable norms can be applied to preserve cultural specificity while highlighting universal themes. Furthermore, the handling of cultural touchstones (e.g., the *Pom Poko* metaphor) shows how local references can illuminate global patterns of cultural change. And Baker's concept of pragmatic equivalence guided decisions about conveying social implications across cultural boundaries.

B. Implications for Translation Studies
This translation project offers several contributions to translation studies. First, for methodological innovation, it demonstrates the effectiveness of combining multiple theoretical approaches rather than adhering strictly to a single framework. Second, it provides a model for handling multiple dialects in translation while preserving their sociolinguistic significance. Third, it suggests ways to balance academic rigour with the accessible presentation of cultural content.

In terms of new theoretical insights, it first challenges the traditional binary of foreignization versus domestication by showing how these approaches can be strategically combined. Second, it extends Nord's functional approach by demonstrating how "loyalty" can be maintained to strike a balance between both source culture specificity and target audience

comprehension. Third, it suggests ways of applying Aixelá's handling of culture-specific items in the context of dialect translation.

The success of this translation, measured by its ability to convey both cultural specificity and universal themes while maintaining scholarly rigour, demonstrates the potential for contemporary Chinese literature to contribute meaningfully to global literary discourse. As China's literary scene continues to evolve and engage with global audiences, translations that maintain this balance between cultural authenticity and universal accessibility become increasingly vital. Through careful cultural and linguistic mediation, informed by both theoretical understanding and practical innovation, translations can help build more nuanced, empathetic perspectives on contemporary Chinese society and its peoples while advancing the field of translation studies itself.

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隐蔽的母语

The Hidden Mother Tongue

晚上淮海路塞车。司机试了几次后不得不屈从于缓慢阻滞的车流，这时旁边有几辆出租车见缝插针地穿插到前面，她的烦躁终于爆发出来，骂了一声："崇蟹！"

That evening, Huaihai Road [1] was gridlocked. The driver made several attempts to move forward before reluctantly accepting the traffic's slow pace. Amid this, a taxi aggressively squeezed right in front of our car. Her frustration erupted, and she cursed, "Chong ha!"

这句骂辞我还是第一次听见，不过立刻就明白是专骂崇明人的 – – 因为崇明方言著名的特征和笑柄之一是"啥"和"蟹"谐音。

This was my first encounter with this particular insult, but I instantly understood it was directed at someone from Chongming Island [2] – famous in part because their dialect makes the words for "sha(what)" and "ha(crab)" sound alike.

我问："刚才那辆车是崇明司机？"她愤愤地扯着大嗓门说："除了这些乡下人还有谁？"她朝前开了一段，缓过劲来又说："先生，我跟你说，不仅我们司机不喜欢崇明人，乘客也不喜欢崇明司机，甚至崇明人自己也不喜欢崇明司机！"我问："最后一点你是怎么知道的？"她没解释，只是继续愤愤骂那些乡下人。

I asked, "Was that taxi driver from Chongming?"
She answered loudly, her irritation unmistakable, "Who else but those bumpkins?" After driving a bit further and calming down, she continued, "You know, it's not just us drivers who dislike people from Chongming. Passengers don't appreciate Chongming drivers either – not even the Chongming folks themselves!"
"How do you know that last bit?" I inquired. She didn't elaborate, just kept venting about "those bumpkins".

她在这个男性为主的行业里已经干了 12 年，并不奇怪，她对崇明司机讨厌的原因之一是他们令人憎恨的勤劳，以至拉低了整个行业的利润。确实，我也听说过，崇明司机有时为了抢生意，在晚上 11 点后会默许那些会砍价的客人免掉 30%的返程费。当然，为了多做几单，他们恐怕也不见得那么遵守交通秩序。

Having worked in the male-dominated taxi industry for 12 years, she had a deep-seated dislike for Chongming drivers, partly due to their notoriously hard-working nature which, she believed, drove down the industry's average earnings. Indeed, it was known that Chongming drivers, in their eagerness to secure more fares, would sometimes waive 30% of the return fare for savvy customers if it was after 11 p.m. In their rush to complete more trips, they often didn't adhere strictly to traffic rules.

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[1] The central section of Huaihai Road is one of two major shopping streets in central Shanghai. Nanjing Road is the other. When comparing with the more touristy Nanjing Road, Huaihai Road is more upmarket, and is the preferred destination of local residents. Note: All footnotes were added by the translator.
[2] Chongming Island, which is located at the Yangtze River estuary, is China's third largest island and the world's largest alluvial sand island. Often referred to as the "door to the Yangtze River" and likened to the mythical Yingzhou Island in the East China Sea, Chongming covers 1,267 square kilometres. Together with the Changxing and Hengsha islands, it forms the northernmost part of Shanghai's provincial-level municipality.

这并非我第一次听到有人吐槽崇明司机。这回我沉住气，直到下车打发票时才告诉她："其实我就是崇明人。" 这个老江湖既不惊讶，也不道歉，甚至没有尴尬，相反端详了我一下说："那你上海话一点也听不出来口音。" 她笑了笑说："侬到底混得好呀！"

I had heard complaints about Chongming drivers like this before, but this time I stayed calm all the way. It wasn't until I was exiting the taxi and requesting a receipt that I disclosed, "Actually, I'm from Chongming".

The veteran driver, seasoned in the ways of city life, showed neither surprise nor apology, not even embarrassment. Instead, she gave me a once-over and commented, "Well, your Shanghainese has no trace of an accent". She grinned and remarked in Shanghainese, "You've really made something of yourself, haven't you!"

的确，在这座中国最大都市的丛林里，只要我隐藏起自己的口音，通常更容易被上海人引为同类，也因此更容易听到别人毫无防备地流露他们建立在方言差异基础之上的地域歧视。

Indeed, in the vast urban landscape of China's largest city, concealing my accent usually makes it easier for locals to see me as one of their own. This, in turn, often makes it simpler for me to witness firsthand the unguarded expressions of regional bias based on dialect differences.

和我早年时想象的相反，在上海生活之后我才逐渐发现，对这种歧视持强烈姿态的正是那些常被视为"善良"的普通百姓，因为只有对这些人来说，"上海人"的身份和纯洁性才特别值得捍卫。

Contrary to my expectations from when I was younger, I discovered after settling in Shanghai that it's often those deemed "kind-hearted" ordinary people who harbour the strongest prejudices. To them, the identity and "purity" of being "from Shanghai" are particularly sacrosanct.

日前读到这段话时我很有共鸣："中国人的地域差别很少看得出，方言几乎是唯一可以凭借的标志。因此，中国人的种族玩笑通常是针对其他群体方言特点的言语游戏，……如果不讲方言，一个中国人可以轻易地伪装自己的地域出身，成为另一个群体的成员。……对个人而言，自己种族群体的交易地位越弱，这种选择的吸引力越大。"（黄绍伦《移民企业家 – – 香港的上海工业家》）。

A passage I recently read struck a chord with me:

Regional differences among Chinese are seldom apparent, with dialect almost the sole identifier. Consequently, ethnic humour among Chinese often centres on the dialect characteristics of other groups. [...] By concealing their dialect, a Chinese person can easily mask their regional background and blend into another group. [...] The more marginalized an individual's ethnic group is in societal exchanges, the more appealing it becomes to adopt this disguise. [Wong Siu-lun, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Shanghai Industrialists in Hong Kong*.]

这种情形实在是太熟悉了。自小到大，电台里常有针对崇明方

This situation is all too familiar to me. When I was growing up, radio shows frequently aired comedy sketches that mocked the Chongming

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言的滑稽戏段落 – – 不过我一直没意识到这是"种族玩笑"。至于通过讲上海话来伪装自己的地域出身，有意无意地也基本都为所有在上海谋生的崇明人所遵守 – – 大概很少有人把讲崇明话当作一个原则问题吧？

和不少崇明人一样，我母亲对自己母语的评价也极低：她觉得这种方言实在难听极了，有时她和外地客人说了几句，甚至自己也哈哈大笑起来。

这就像《小泥屋笔记》里说的，非洲的多瓦悠人看不起自己的母语，多数酋长甚至"拒绝使用此种原始、不雅，只比动物鸣叫略高一等的语言，因此他们不懂为何有人学不会它"。有些酋长则效法当地强势的富来尼人，自抬身价，"即使面对族人也拒绝说多瓦悠语。听到母语，却装出听不太懂的样子。"就像有些中国人，喜欢苦恼地表示自己"中文说得不好"。

大一的寒假里，我听说了一个故事：考到上海高校的高中同学里，某个男生在浸染了上海的繁华后，兴奋地故意用半生不熟的上海话给同城的女同学打电话 – – 他的这个玩笑触怒了对方，女孩子骂了他一句"触眼睛骨"（讨厌）。

那时假期回来，每次遇到老同学，都发现他的语言表达的混乱加剧：他说着说着就从崇明话跳到普通话，又不断夹杂着上海话和英语。他甚至自觉地和另一个同学互相比较谁的上海话讲得不露口音，

dialect – though I never recognized these as "ethnic jokes". Nearly all Chongming inhabitants adopt Shanghainese to obscure their regional background, whether it is conscious or not. Presumably, few regard speaking the Chongming dialect as a matter of principle?

Like many from Chongming, my mother holds her mother tongue in low esteem. She finds the dialect grating to the ear. Sometimes, after exchanging a few words with out-of-town guests, she herself bursts into laughter.

This reminds me of a section from *The Innocent Anthropologist: Notes from a Mud Hut*, where the Dowayo people of Africa had disdain for their own language. Many chiefs refused to use what they considered a primitive, inelegant language. They believed it was barely better than animal calls and were puzzled why someone would take the time to learn it. Emulating the locally dominant Fulani, some chiefs tried to boost their status by not speaking Dowayo even to their own people, choosing instead to emulate the locally dominant Fulani. Upon hearing their native language, they pretended to barely comprehend it. This mirrors how some Chinese lament their "poor Chinese language skills".

During winter break of my freshman year of university, I heard a tale about a high school peer who had recently started attending Shanghai Jiaotong University, one of the top universities in China. Revelling in the city's glamour, he playfully called a female classmate from our hometown in his rudimentary Shanghainese. His jest fell flat. Instead, it provoked the girl to snap back "chu yanjing gu" (how annoying) using our local dialect.

Whenever I met this old classmate after that winter holiday, I noticed his speech was becoming increasingly disjointed. He would start a sentence in the Chongming dialect and then switch to standard Mandarin while mixing in bits of Shanghainese and English. He and another high school peer, both originally from Chongming but studying in Shanghai, would self-consciously compare whose Shanghainese was more seamless; the one whose

然后两人中遗留"崇明味"较重的一个遭到自己同乡的嘲笑。上海话一直讲不溜损害了他的自信，最后这个交大高材生毕业后出乎我们所有人的预料，回了崇明 – – 他内心深处觉得自己无法融入上海。他讲上海话时会紧张。

speech retained a stronger "Chongming flavour" would be mocked by the other. This top student from Jiaotong University, whose confidence had dwindled due to his struggles with Shanghainese, surprised us by moving back to Chongming after graduation. Deep down, he felt unable to blend into Shanghai life, growing anxious whenever he spoke Shanghainese.

有时高中老同学间到别的大学串门，一路说说笑笑 – – 不过到近校门的地方就自觉地压低声音以至不说话。因为一群人说崇明话很容易被门卫辨别出来，混进校门就不大方便了。那时他们把这个故事当作笑话讲给我听，自比为穿过鬼子防线的土八路。

Sometimes, when visiting other universities, my high school classmates would instinctively lower their voices or stop talking altogether whenever they neared the campus gates. Any group that spoke in the Chongming dialect could easily be recognized by university's security guards and complicate their entry onto other campuses. They laughed while sharing this experience with me, likening themselves to the Local Eighth Route Army[3] stealthily crossing enemy lines.

口音的隐蔽是一种生存技能，艰于掌握，不仅是发音的模仿，还涉及微妙的分寸拿捏。就像你想要扮演某个角色，远不只是换身戏服，还得举手投足都到位。

Mastering the concealment of one's accent is a subtle art of survival. It involves more than just mimicking pronunciation: it requires a subtle understanding of social norms. It's akin to playing a role – not only do you change your attire, but you must also adopt every nuance of the character's behaviour.

有一晚加班回家，出租车司机送我到三林城，感叹了一声："现在老上海都被赶到外环来了。" 他转头问我："侬是买的房子？"我开玩笑说："我也是拆迁过来的。"他一边打票一边瞟了我一眼，说："不可能，你口音不像。" "那你觉得我是哪里的？" "你的口音已经掩盖得极

One night, returning home after overtime, the taxi driver took me to Sanlin.[4] He sighed, "Now even Shanghainese natives are being pushed out to the outer ring". He turned and asked me in Shanghainese, "Did you buy your apartment here?" I joked, "No, I moved here because of urban renewal". As he printed the receipt, he glanced at me and said, "Impossible. Your accent doesn't match". "So, where do you think I'm from?" I asked. "Your accent is so well masked, it's hard to pinpoint…" He

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[3] The name "土八路 (tu ba lu) is a colloquial and somewhat informal term derived from "八路军 (ba lu jun), which means the Eighth Route Army. This was a military unit of the National Revolutionary Army of the Republic of China, which was under the command of the Chinese Communist Party during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). The term "土" in "土八路" means "local" or "native" and implies something rudimentary or rustic. When combined with the Eighth Route Army, it emphasizes their grassroots, peasant-based composition and their close connection with local Chinese population, as opposed to a more formally trained and equipped military force.

[4] Pudong, which denotes "the East Bank of the Huangpu River", originally described the less-developed territory facing Shanghai's urban core. This area, largely agricultural, saw only gradual development until the 1990s. Sanlin Town, situated on the periphery, is a typical example of one of the most remote towns within Pudong.

好，很难辨别……"他侧头思索了一会，逐一排除周围郊县，最后说："倒有点像是崇明、启东那一带的。"

一半是出于必要，一半是出于羞耻，我们慢慢习惯于将自己真正的母语隐蔽起来 － － 它逐渐收缩自己的使用范围，从街头退缩到家门内，最后变得更像是深藏心底的隐私。

现在高中同学偶尔聚会，有的人已经习惯于讲上海话 － － 无人会嘲笑他们，相反，他们看起来有理由嘲笑仍讲崇明话的人。这就像我经历过的职场，时而出现的中国人之间大讲英语一样。

这当然并非崇明人独有的遭遇。"上海的苏北人往往费很大力气来掩盖其身份。最常见的办法是，他们在家外或在邻里不讲江北方言，部分是为了避免惹麻烦，但也是为了确保不让任何人知道他们的苏北人身份。最年轻一代的成员就连在家里也不想讲苏北方言。……有些人以自己是苏北人为耻简直做绝了，有些在上海长大的年轻人竟同他们的父母完全脱离关系。"（《苏北人在上海，1850－1980》）

这些情形我都在崇明人身上目睹过 － － 也不奇怪，在很长一段时间里，崇明实际上也是被划在"苏北"的范围之内的，虽然不少崇明人自认要比更北的这些穷乡亲高那么一丁点，甚至讲着同样方

pondered for a moment, methodically ruling out the surrounding suburban counties one by one, before finally suggesting, "You might be from around Chongming or Qidong[5]".

Out of necessity and sometimes shame, we've become adept at hiding our true mother tongue. Its use dwindles, moving from public streets to the privacy of our homes, eventually becoming a deeply guarded secret.

Now, when high school classmates meet up, some naturally converse in Shanghainese. They face no ridicule – quite the opposite, they are the ones who might tease those who still cling to the Chongming dialect. This mirrors my workplace experiences, where Chinese colleagues often opt to speak in English with each other.

Of course, this experience isn't unique to people from Chongming.

In Shanghai, people from Subei (northern Jiangsu province) often go to great lengths to hide their origins. The most common strategy is to refrain from speaking their native Subei dialect outside their homes or in their neighbourhoods, partly to avoid conflicts but also to prevent others from discovering their origins. The youngest generation at home even avoids speaking the dialect [...]. Some people are so ashamed of their Subei roots that some young people who grew up in Shanghai have entirely severed ties with their parents.

I've seen all these scenarios among Chongming residents, which isn't surprising since Chongming was long considered part of the "northern Jiangsu" region. Many Chongming residents saw themselves as slightly better off than their poorer northern neighbours. Even those from Haimen[6] and Qidong, who spoke the same dialect, were disparaged as "shashangren" (sand dwellers)

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[5] Qidong, a county-level city administered by Nantong in southeastern Jiangsu province, China, is situated on the northern bank of the Yangtze River opposite Shanghai. It forms a peninsula extending into the East China Sea.
[6] Haimen, a district within Nantong, Jiangsu province, hosts a population of approximately one million. It lies on the opposite bank of the Yangtze River from Shanghai, directly north of Chongming Island.

言的海门、启东人，在我小时候还被归为"沙上人"而受鄙视。必须承认，在这环环相扣的鄙视链上，崇明人并不总是受害者。

在时代的浪潮面前，连上海话这些年来也逐渐成了濒危物种，更弱势的崇明话自然更无人在意，有谁会把坚持说母语方言当作一个原则问题来加以捍卫吗？但对我们这些曾以它为生的人来说，那就像是随身携带的一片故土，有着与生俱来的亲切和安心。

就像宫崎骏的动画《百变狸猫》里那样，狸猫们最终敌不过坚持都市开发的人类，结局是他们不得不变化为人类，同样在都市里谋生，只不过对他们来说，一起变回狸猫时，才是自由的一刻。

and looked down upon during my childhood. It's important to acknowledge that in this tangled web of disdain, Chongming residents are not always the victims.

In the face of changing times, even Shanghainese has gradually become endangered. The more vulnerable Chongming dialect naturally receives even less attention. Few are willing to champion the cause of speaking their mother tongue on principle. Yet for those of us who once lived by it, it's akin to carrying a piece of our homeland, providing an innate sense of familiarity and comfort.

This is reminiscent of Hayao Miyazaki's animated film "Pom Poko", where the tanuki (raccoon dogs) are ultimately unable to withstand the humans' push for urban development.[7] In the end, they have no choice but to transform into humans and adapt to city life. For them, however, the moments when they can revert to being tanuki together represent their true freedom.

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[7] The author has misattributed the direction of the film *Pom Poko* (Japanese: 平成狸合戦ぽんぽこ, Hepburn: Heisei Tanuki Gassen Ponpoko, literally: "Heisei-era Raccoon Dog War Ponpoko"). This 1994 Japanese animated fantasy film was written and directed by Isao Takahata, not by Hayao Miyazaki, though both are prominent directors from Studio Ghibli. Takahata and Miyazaki have both directed works for the studio, but each is known for distinct projects.