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RESEARCH ARTICLE

L2 Investment in the Transnational Context: A Case Study of PRC Scholar Students in Singapore

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Abstract

Despite growing research on mainland Chinese international students' intercultural language learning and adjustment experiences in anglophone countries, few studies have delved into these students' socially constructed language learning practices as an essential component of their study-abroad journey, especially in Singapore, which shares linguistic and cultural affinities with China. As such, building on Darvin and Norton's (2015) theory of investment at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology, this case study focuses on Chinese foreign talent students in Singapore. It aims to understand how they invest in learning English as an additional language (L2) and assert their legitimate place in the transnational context. Based on the analysis of data collected from two focused students (Baoyu and Gongcai, both pseudonyms), this study reveals the varied, complex, and agentive ways in which the two cases invested in English learning and English-mediated social interactions. It showed that both participants developed different investment pathways shaped by their endeavors to reconstruct desired identities and their motivation to actualize capital conversion. Their investment in English language learning was also largely impacted by dominant ideologies and institutional policies. This study contributes to the field by highlighting the role of social networks in shaping learners' investment practices, the influence of cultural capital on their investment choices, and the role of agency in challenging prevailing ideologies and navigating sociocultural dynamics in the study-abroad context. This study also proposes educational and policy implications concerning Chinese foreign talent students in Singapore and points out directions for future research.

Keywords: language investment, identity, second language learning, Chinese foreign talent students in Singapore

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As a cosmopolitan city-state in Southeast Asia, Singapore has been a popular study-abroad destination for students from Asian countries like China (Gomes, 2016). In light of a recent report released by the New Oriental Education & Technology Group (2022), with more than 50,000 currently enrolled international students from mainland China in Singapore as of 2021, there has been a notable increase in the number of Chinese international students pursuing degrees at the tertiary level in Singapore. This trend can be attributed to several factors, such as Singapore's reputation for providing high-quality and English-medium education, and its geographical and cultural proximity to China (Gomes, 2016; Tran et al., 2016). Among the Chinese international students in Singapore, a subset consists of secondary school students who receive funding from the Singaporean government as "Foreign Talent." Singapore's efforts to attract foreign workers and talents can be traced back to the 1980s, driven by a declining birth rate and a significant brain drain (Gomes, 2016). To ensure the nation's prosperity, the ruling People's Action Party adopted a pragmatic governing approach that influenced various aspects of state functions and permeated the public sphere (Tan, 2012). Recognizing human resources as critical capital for the city-state's economy, the Singaporean government implemented several pro-immigration policies to address labor shortages and secure global economic competitiveness (Lu, 2021; Yang, 2014b). One such initiative is the Senior Middle One (SM1) program, launched in the 1990s to enhance Singapore's talent pool (Yang, 2014b). This program fully funds approximately 200 high-performing junior middle school graduates from mainland China each year, enabling them to study at Singaporean senior high schools and, subsequently, tertiary institutions (Yeoh & Lin, 2013). The objective of the program is to have these students, known as PRC scholars or PRC scholar students,[1] settle in Singapore and contribute to the local economy as potential talents in the future (Lu, 2021).

The increasing number of Chinese international students in Singapore has prompted researchers to explore various aspects of adult international students' cross-cultural adjustment experiences (e.g., Nasirudeen et al., 2019; Yang, 2014b). However, limited research exists on how PRC scholar students engage in English language learning practices from a sociocultural perspective, both inside and outside the classroom. Understanding the socially situated language learning of Chinese international students is crucial, as it is intertwined with their transnational learning and lived experiences (Liu et al., 2022). To address this research gap, this qualitative case study aims to provide in-depth insights into the complex social realities experienced by PRC scholar students as transnational English language learners. Additionally, we aim to examine how their past learning experiences and cultural beliefs shape their perspectives, learning approaches, and relationships with the English language in Singapore. Thus, this paper primarily focuses on one research question: To what extent did PRC scholar students invest in English language learning and negotiate their resources to assert their legitimate place while studying in Singapore?

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on the theory of investment to understand the complexities of PRC scholar students' English-mediated practices. Investment perceives L2 learning commitment as contingent upon power relations and the learner's social identity constructed within the target community (Norton Peirce, 1995). As a sociocultural complement to the concept of motivation, investment explains why some deeply motivated learners may fail to engage in language learning practices and achieve L2 learning progress in contexts fraught with dynamic power relations (Norton Peirce, 1995). Investment conceptualizes the learner as "having a complex social history and multiple desires" (Norton, 2000, p. 10). If learners invest in the target language, they will be rewarded with various symbolic and material benefits, which will, in turn, increase their social power (Liu & Darvin, 2023; Norton, 2013). In a world wrought by globalization and transnational migration, Darvin and Norton (2015) developed an expanded model of investment (see Figure 1) that fits with the increasingly digitalized, mobilized, and diversified language learning realities. This model features three intersecting factors—identity, capital, and ideology—that intertwine with each other and shape one's L2 investment.

[1] PRC is an abbreviation for the People's Republic of China. This paper adopts Singapore's local parlance by referring to mainland Chinese students as PRC students and mainland Chinese scholarship-holding students as PRC scholar students. In our study, we define PRC scholar students as Chinese international students, who came to study in Singapore in their mid-teens with fully funded government-sponsored scholarships.

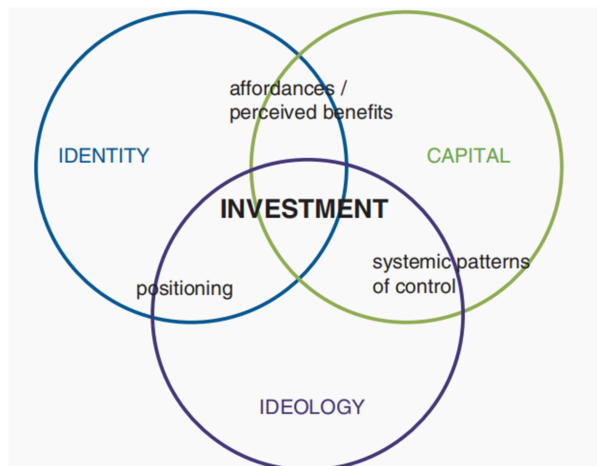

Figure 1
Darvin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment

Identity refers to how one perceives their relationship with the target language, how this is realized over time and space, and how one views future probabilities (Norton, 2013). Adopting a poststructuralist perspective, Norton (2013) conceptualized identity as multiple, fluid, contradictory, and socially constructed. It has a mutually constitutive relationship with language in that while identities can be reflected through the medium of language, one could use linguistic resources to enable certain identities (e.g., Liu & Darvin, 2023). In the study-abroad context, although language learners may be subject to ascribed social categories (e.g., foreigner), they can exercise their agency to challenge these assigned positionings and assert new and desired identities by negotiating certain L2 practices to expand their current identity repertoire (Kinginger, 2013).

Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1986), Darvin and Norton (2015) defined *capital* as power in economic, social, and cultural forms. As investment is a concept that interrogates the relations of power in specific L2 contexts, one's economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital play an important role in negotiating their L2 investment in a given social community (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Liu, 2023a). Characterized by its fluidity and dynamicity, the value of capital shifts in different social spaces partially due to the operation of different ideologies (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Once the capital is deemed legitimate by those in power within a specific context, it can be converted into *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu, 1986).

Ideology is understood as "dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion, and the privileging and marginalization of ideas, people, and relations" (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 44). Within this conceptualization, language ideology plays a significant role in positioning L2 learners and their legitimate linguistic resources in new social spaces (Darvin & Norton, 2023). Language ideology encompasses the prevailing beliefs about language use and status in a community (Cameron, 2003). These ideologies are politically constructed and often rationalize the power of certain groups by framing their languages as superior (De Costa, 2010). When language learners navigate different contexts, competing or colluding ideologies shape their identities as competent or incompetent by valuing or devaluing their linguistic capital. Consequently, investing in the target language requires learners to assert agency, negotiate power relations, and claim the right to speak as legitimate language learners (Darvin & Norton, 2023; Liu, 2022; Liu et al., 2023a). In the context of Singapore, the status of English as a global language is ideologically constructed and driven by globalization and the colonial expansion of English-speaking states (Crystal, 2003; Park, 2015). Claiming the ownership of English in Singapore may often create scenes of ideological struggles given the economic and symbolic value of English, which makes it a highly sought-after asset either in the global job market (Heller, 2010) or the margins of globalization (Liu & Ma, 2023). Another ideological characterization of Singapore is *pragmatism,* which refers to a prevalent ideology characterized by practicality, usefulness, and self-interest (Mauzy & Milne, 2002). This ideology permeates not only language education and policies but also the daily consciousness of Singaporeans (Tan, 2012). Understanding ideology is crucial in investigating L2 investment, as it unveils systemic patterns of control in second language acquisition (De Costa, 2010). By examining the role of ideology in specific contexts, researchers can gain insights into the complex dynamics that influence language learning experiences.

Literature Review

Research on Chinese Students' Language Learning in Transnational/Transborder Contexts

The field of second language acquisition has witnessed a sociocultural turn in recent decades (Block,

2003; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Although it has been generally accepted that learners can improve their language proficiency with appropriate cognitive learning strategies (Zhang & Beck, 2014), certain social factors (e.g., identity, agency, and investment) play an equally significant role in their language development (Block, 2003). Despite flourishing work on Chinese international students' socially situated language learning experiences, much of the existing studies are situated in anglophone countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (e.g., Cao & Newton, 2019; Liu et al., 2022; Zhang & Beck, 2014). An example of such research is Cao and Newton's (2019) study, which drew on Norton's (2013) conception of identity to explore how three Chinese international students in New Zealand universities negotiated their identities while investing in English. They found that participants' construction of multiple identities and language investment progressed along distinct trajectories, which were shaped by the degree to which they were accepted by the host community and the agency they enacted while managing their interpersonal interactions with the host society.

Meanwhile, there is also increasing empirical knowledge about Chinese students' language learning experiences in multilingual, non-anglophone, and postcolonial contexts where their efforts to learn and use the target language can be complicated by multiple sociolinguistic and sociopolitical factors. Specifically, some relevant studies have been conducted in the context of Hong Kong, exploring how mainland Chinese students negotiate their language identities by utilizing their cultural or social resources (or lack thereof) and navigating the ideological structure while learning and using their L2 in the super diverse and complex reality of Hong Kong (e.g., Gu, 2011, 2016; Li & Liu, 2023; Sung, 2020).

Given the contextual similarities between Hong Kong and Singapore for mainland Chinese students, a review of these empirical studies can offer valuable insights for our research. Drawing on interview data, Gu (2016) explored how language ideologies and identities were formed among mainland Chinese students at a Hong Kong university. She found that, besides the impact of globalization, mainland Chinese students' employment of cultural capital (e.g., the ability to speak Mandarin) allowed them to enact their identity as advantageous multilingual users instead of inadequate language learners. Such a positioning change enabled them to expand their L2 communication circles and social networks in Hong Kong. Similarly, Sung (2019) adopted a sociocultural perspective to investigate how undergraduate students from mainland China participate in English language learning practices and negotiate their legitimate identities in Hong Kong. His findings suggested that participants' engagement with L2 practices was influenced by the contextual factors of the distinct communities within the university (e.g., the local student community, the classroom community, and the exchange student community) and their agentic reactions to the contextual conditions of these communities. Applying a language ideological perspective, Sung (2022) later revealed that these participants maintained a distinct set of language ideologies concerning Cantonese, Mandarin, and English, which led to ambivalent attitudes towards their language investment due to the co-existence and competition of multiple language ideologies. Focusing on the language variety of Cantonese, Sung (2020) drew on Norton's (2000) conceptualization of identity and investment as well as Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment to analyze mainland Chinese students' investment in Cantonese learning in Hong Kong. Aligning with his other papers, he illustrated how the complex and dynamic interactions of identity, capital, and ideology influenced mainland Chinese students' investment in Cantonese-mediated social practices.

Research on PRC Scholar Students in Singapore

As observed by Benson et al. (2012), a study-abroad experience can lead to distinct changes in learners' L2 development and identity construction. As more and more Chinese international students choose to study in Singapore, an emerging body of research has examined their sociocultural experiences, with a particular focus on their acculturation, intercultural adjustments, and in-class language learning (e.g., Dimmock & Ong, 2010; Tran et al., 2016; Yang, 2014a, 2014b, 2017). De Costa's (2010) year-long ethnographic case study examined an SM1 PRC scholar student's language learning experiences and perceptions. This study highlighted how the participant negotiated her identities against state-imposed language ideologies and policies. However, despite the depth of this study, its focus was primarily limited to defining English as a school subject rather than a medium of interaction

beyond the classroom. Also, a close inspection of relevant empirical literature shows that most studies only attach importance to PRC students' language learning experiences within the classroom (see Sim, 2005; Yang, 2015).

Although there are still limited studies that have systematically explored PRC students' everyday communicative contexts in which language learning occurs as social practices in Singapore, a review of current literature may still enrich our understanding of the research backgrounds of the present study. For example, Tsang's (2001) quantitative survey research found that PRC university students were able to adapt easily to Singaporean society partly due to the widespread use of Mandarin in Singapore. However, more recent research (e.g., Chacko, 2021; Gomes, 2016; Nasirudeen et al., 2019) has challenged the generalizability of Tsang's (2001) findings by pointing out the adaptation difficulties that PRC students confronted due to language-based challenges. Specifically, Nasirudeen et al. (2019) highlighted the changing linguistic reality in Singapore, where Singaporean Chinese have become increasingly proficient in English and use Mandarin less frequently in daily communication. Due to cultural and linguistic differences, the PRC students were found to suffer from high levels of acculturative stress (Nasirudeen et al., 2019). This finding echoes Chacko's (2021) study, which revealed that PRC students' lack of spoken fluency in English and distinctive accents contributed to their sense of alienation, making it difficult for them to adapt to Singaporean society. Furthermore, Yang's (2014b) ethnographic study on PRC scholar students disclosed that their inadequate command of English resulted in some local Singaporeans being suspicious of their academic caliber. These doubts, alongside other stereotypes of PRC students (e.g., low moral character and low loyalty to Singapore), have contributed to the growing public sentiments against recruiting large numbers of foreign talent students (especially from mainland China) in Singapore (e.g., Wee, 2001, as cited in Yang, 2014b).

Besides the challenges faced by PRC students in integrating into Singaporean society due to language barriers, there is a prevalence of mutual stereotyping and rejection between PRC students and local Singaporeans. Several qualitative studies (e.g., Dimmock & Ong, 2010; Steele, 2008; Yang, 2014b, 2017) have documented the disappointment experienced by PRC students with the widespread use of Singlish[2] by Singaporeans, which not only resulted in the social marginalization of PRC students (because they did not speak Singlish) but also called into question Singapore's status as an authentic English-speaking country. For instance, Steele (2008) found that some PRC university students were reluctant to befriend local students to shield their English learning from the perceived negative influence of Singlish, which they considered a "non-standard" form of English. This perspective is deeply ingrained in the "standard" English ideology, which typically frames British and American English as the standardized, correct versions of English (Fang, 2017; Tupas & Rubdy, 2015). Consequently, it contradicts the democratic ideal of embracing linguistic diversity by marginalizing users of regional varieties (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015).

With respect to the Chinese language, Yang (2014b) discovered that although it facilitated the adjustment of PRC scholar students to life in Singapore to some extent, it also engendered mutual othering. Specifically, local students ridiculed the regional dialect accents of PRC scholar students, whereas the latter considered the Chinese language proficiency of their Singaporean counterparts to be "woefully inadequate" (Yang, 2014b, p. 367). Interestingly, the studies of Lu (2020, 2021) demonstrated that academically elite PRC students engaged in interactions with their Singaporean peers by actively utilizing their full linguistic repertoires and minimizing speech patterns that might signal their migrant status or Chinese origins. This was due to the perception that such identities were unsophisticated and impeded social integration with local students, particularly in light of negative discourses surrounding immigration and PRC immigrants in Singapore.

As previous studies have shown, language can be a critical factor that influences PRC students' cross-border socialization experiences. However, research findings on this aspect remain fragmented and incidental. As language plays a pivotal role in securing membership in a community (De Costa, 2010), a deeper understanding of their language learning would provide valuable insights into the sociocultural encounters of international students in Singapore. Moreover, as prior research has primarily focused on self-funded or university-level PRC students, an examination of

[2] Singlish, which constitutes predominantly features of English, Malay, Hokkien, Mandarin, and Cantonese, is an informal, colloquial variety of English used by Singaporeans (Tan, 2017).

secondary school and pre-university students would likely yield different results on account of their unique circumstances in Singapore and challenge the stereotypes of the homogeneous PRC international student group (Ruble & Zhang, 2013).

Method

The Research Context: A Multilingual Singapore

Singapore's multicultural and multilingual society provides a unique context for investigating L2 learning. Its four official languages—English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil—reflect both its British colonial past and current ethnic compositions. According to the Department of Statistics (2023), 74.0% of Singapore's resident population are ethnic Chinese, followed by 13.5% Malays and 9.0% Indians. To connect to the world economy, Singapore has promoted English as the inter-ethnic lingua franca and the medium of communication for multiple sectors, including education, politics, business, and media (Tang, 2020). The other three official languages are regarded primarily as "repositories of cultural values" of the respective ethnic groups in Singapore (Wee, 2003, p. 211). Chinese, for example, has served as a vehicle for the state's program to inculcate Confucian values and as a means of taking advantage of China's socioeconomic rise (Yang, 2014a). In contemporary Singapore, despite English's status as the predominant medium of education and a compulsory school subject, Singapore's bilingual policy requires students to learn the mother tongue subject in primary and secondary schools (Tan, 2017) in a bid to sustain students' interest and maintain the vitality of their native language (Lee, 2012).

A Case Study

This study employed a qualitative research design to capture participants' voices as they narrated their personal stories, language behaviors, and aspirations (Darvin & Norton, 2023). To this end, a case study approach was adopted to analyze the language investment experiences of two focal PRC scholar students. Ethical approval was obtained through the University College London's research ethics committee.

Two participants (Baoyu and Gongcai, both pseudonyms) were recruited based on three inclusion criteria: (a) they were within the SM1 bond period, (b) they had a minimum length of stay in Singapore of six months, and (c) they identified as Chinese first language (L1) speakers. Both informants were invited to read an information sheet and sign a consent form before participating in this research.

Baoyu and Gongcai

Baoyu, a first-year student at a co-educational government-run junior college in Singapore, hails from a middle-class family in Xi'an, Shaanxi province. His father holds a bachelor's degree and has studied abroad as an exchange student, whereas his mother completed a diploma program in China. Despite their busy schedules running their own businesses, Baoyu's parents made substantial investments in his education by enrolling him in supplementary English classes at a reputable language center when he first began learning English in primary school. During his leisure time, Baoyu found enjoyment in watching American TV series and imitating the characters' dialogues. This regular exposure to English significantly contributed to his strong speaking and listening skills and fueled his curiosity about language and culture. Motivated by this curiosity, Baoyu actively sought opportunities for cultural immersion, such as the SM1 program.

Gongcai, on the other hand, was born into a middle-class family in Langfang, Hebei province. Currently in her fourth year at an independent all-girls Christian secondary school, Gongcai's mother has a vocational education background and works in an insurance company, whereas her father holds a bachelor's degree and works as an engineer. Both parents highly value education and have set high expectations for Gongcai's academic performance. Similar to Baoyu, Gongcai started learning English in the third grade as part of her primary school curriculum. Although she did not take any English classes outside of school, Gongcai excelled in her English exams consistently, securing the top position in her class. Her success can be attributed to her commitment to memorizing vocabulary, mastering grammatical rules, and completing numerous exercises. Gongcai was overjoyed to be selected for the SM1 program, as it was a significant honor for her family.

Data Collection

Solicited Diaries

In early March 2021, participants were invited to keep diaries over a week, making entries on at least four days (see Table 1 for more details). With the support of a diary guide (see Appendix 1), they were asked to record their experiences and reflections on English learning and English-mediated social experiences. The timing was strategically chosen to avoid conflicts with participants' exam schedules and school holidays. The one-week duration aligned with the recommended optimal period for solicited diaries, which typically ranges between one to two weeks, aiming to balance in-depth data collection with participants' potential fatigue (see Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). To minimize attrition and ensure the "quality, quantity and focus of participant entries" (Rose, 2020, p. 4), we gave participants flexibility on the type of diary (i.e., written, audio, or/and video formats) they preferred to author, and all of them chose the written form. To reduce their literacy burden (Rose, 2020), we allowed them to use either English or Chinese or a mix of both.

Semi-structured Interviews

Following the completion of the diaries, we reviewed the diary entries and marked parts that required additional clarifications. To triangulate the diary data, we prepared customized interview guides (see Appendix 2) for each participant based on the theoretical model and their diary entries. We conducted audio-recorded individual interviews with participants via Zoom to gather further insights into their investment decisions. This took place on April 8, 2021, after the participants' March holiday and prior to the onset of intensive school commitments. Both interviews lasted around 40 minutes. The semi-structured interview style was chosen to provide a balance of structure and flexibility to probe with follow-up questions around our research topic (Cohen et al., 2011). Both participants selected Chinese as the interview language, the L1 shared by the authors and the participants, as they felt more comfortable and expressive when communicating in Chinese. They would occasionally switch to English in cases where the English term was more familiar to them and more commonly used among their peers (e.g., scholars, Singlish, and locals).

Data Analysis

Drawing on previous literature that examines the investment experiences of participants from complex backgrounds (e.g., Liu, 2022, 2023b), a within-case analysis was first conducted by referring to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method, which is helpful in analyzing small-scale qualitative research data. First, audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and combined into a single Word document along with the diary entries and analyzed collectively. Then, we deductively looked for investment-, ideology-, identity-, and capital-related elements based on the model of L2 investment while inductively keeping an eye on other interesting aspects emerging from the data. Initial codes were assigned to these data (e.g., mobilizing academic capital, the locals taking an interest in Chinese, and "standard" English in exams) by manually typing in the Word document. Similar codes were identified and merged into broader categories, which were further combined into three themes to summarize each participant's English learning and English-mediated social experiences in Singapore as Chinese transnational students. Each theme was reviewed to ensure its congruence with the

Table 1
Data Collection Through Diaries

	Baoyu	Gongcai
Number of diary entries	4	4
Number of Chinese characters and English words	907 Chinese characters and 27 English words	1,219 Chinese characters and 484 English words
Format elicited	Textual data in Notes shared through WeChat	Textual data in Microsoft Word shared through WeChat
Languages used	Mainly Chinese with occasional use of English	Diaries 1 and 2: mainly Chinese with occasional use of English; Diaries 3 and 4: English

entire data set and relevance to the research question, and individual narrative reports were produced for both cases. Finally, cross-case analysis was performed by examining how each participant's experiences related to or diverged from the other. The recorded data were coded in their original language, whereas illustrative quotes selected for inclusion in the Findings were transcribed and translated into English if they were originally not.

Reflexivity

The first author's insider status as a former PRC scholar student helped establish rapport and foster a better sense of awareness concerning participants' experiences and feelings, shaping the design of the data collection instruments, the translation, and the analysis. Also, the first author's identity as the one who has graduated and left Singapore encouraged participants to candidly critique their sojourn in Singapore. During this process, the second author paid special attention to challenging taken-for-granted assumptions associated with insider identity, which enhanced the truthfulness of the data and the research rigor.

Findings

Baoyu

Negotiating a Legitimate Position in a Foreign Land

Before school started, Baoyu heard from his seniors that PRC scholar students were typically perceived as "bookish, reticent, and anti-social" (Interview). They were known for "keeping people a thousand miles away [拒人于千里之外]", "forming academic circles" among themselves, and "treating Singapore as a springboard" to reach the rest of the world (Interview). Believing this negative positioning to be a hindrance to forming meaningful relationships with the locals, Baoyu decided to exercise his agency and subvert these imposed stereotypes.

One strategy Baoyu utilized to gain acceptance into the local community was to learn Singlish, which he regarded as "a bridge to connect Singaporeans and [himself]" (Interview). His proactive adoption of Singlish was also partly driven by the difficulty he experienced while trying to speak "standard" English. Being a Chinese L1 speaker, he found it far easier to learn Singlish, which often utilizes Chinese-derived vocabulary and shares grammatical and syntactical similarities with Chinese.

Therefore, Baoyu made a conscious effort to apply Singlish in real-life interactional situations with the locals, incorporating sentence modifiers such as "lah"[3] and "lor,"[4] as well as exclamation words like "walau"[5] (Interview). This process presented him favorably as part of the Singaporean community, which allowed him to connect with local students and adapt to this new English-medium environment:

> Many people naturally regarded me as their own kind ... A senior student even asked me if I'm a local Singaporean ... The accent implies we may have similar experiences and ways of living and thinking. (Interview)

By adopting the local accent and language, Baoyu was signaling his cultural alignment and shared identity with Singaporeans, which he believed to be an important criterion for legitimacy within a community. Beyond the institutional context, Baoyu's utilization of Singlish also stood him in good stead in other communicative situations. Specifically, he was able to use Singlish to transform his initially disadvantaged identity as a foreign student into that of a legitimate member in Singapore, as evidenced by a Grab ride experience:

> When I told the driver I came from China, he responded sarcastically, implying Chinese people like us were taking away resources from Singapore. However, after hearing me speak, he became very friendly and asked if I was already a PR [Permanent Resident]. (Interview)

Mobilizing Linguistic and Academic Capital to Reproduce Social Capital

As a Chinese student, Baoyu was able to mobilize capital (e.g., his Chinese linguistic resources) to support his Singaporean peers' academic work, which increased opportunities for social interactions with local students. Baoyu's Chinese language ability,

[3] "Lah" is a Singlish sentence-final particle used to emphasize a point, soften the utterance, and create a feeling of solidarity, familiarity, and informality with the addressee (Lee, 2004; Richards & Tay, 1977).

[4] "Lor" is a Singlish sentence-final particle that functions to indicate affirmation, signal the emergence of new circumstances, or to encourage or discourage a certain course of action (Lee, 2004).

[5] "Walau" is a Singlish expletive used to convey exclamations such as surprise, disbelief, frustration, and annoyance (Lee, 2004).

which had practical importance in China, also proved useful in academic scenarios in Singapore, especially in Chinese language classes:

> When I was in secondary school, I also helped the locals with learning Chinese, like answering vocabulary questions and analyzing articles. They would also approach me and ask if I needed help with anything related to English. (Diary 3)

In this way, Baoyu established himself as a skillful and helpful student who was dedicated to sharing his knowledge of Chinese and assisting his classmates with schoolwork. In return, the local students reciprocated with their support of Baoyu's English studies. Forming new friendships, Baoyu had the opportunity to interact with the locals on a more personal level. For example, he taught curious friends Chinese swear words and Internet slang and shared interesting news about China. Such a process indeed demonstrated how Baoyu's cultural capital was recognized by her Singaporean peers and converted into social capital.

However, after proceeding to junior college, Baoyu realized that Chinese was no longer a compulsory subject, and local students were not obligated to learn the language in school. This led Baoyu to feel that his Chinese language skills had lost practical value in terms of creating social opportunities with the locals.

Apart from his Chinese linguistic skills, Baoyu was able to transform his academic capital into opportunities for communicating with local students in English. With a strong foundation in Physics and Mathematics, Baoyu actively assisted his peers in solving difficult exam questions. This helped him further establish his role as a trustworthy academic resource among his classmates.

Navigating Prevailing Language Ideologies to Invest in English Language Learning

Baoyu was also influenced by language ideologies that shape the meanings and values attached to particular languages or language varieties. Specifically, his investment in English was driven by the relevance of English in his immediate lived experiences, particularly as a medium of education and a tested school subject. Moreover, he recognized the significance and function of the language in the context of an increasingly globalized world, which further boosted his investment in mastering the language:

> If I travel to Japan or France, I can communicate with people in English ... I can also read materials such as news in English. This offers different perspectives of the world and benefits my studies. (Interview)

The symbolic value of English was a crucial factor in shaping Baoyu's thinking, leading him to see it as a global language that could broaden his understanding of the world. Unlike many of his fellow PRC scholar students, who believed that spoken English proficiency was dependent on having a perfect accent, Baoyu viewed English as a tool that could be used for effective communication:

> For me, the most important thing is being able to talk easily with people ... In Singapore, Singlish is regarded as a unique culture ... My [fellow PRC] classmates pursued a "standard" accent and turned into neither fish nor fowl [*变成了四不像*]. (Interview)

Baoyu's embrace of Singlish as a unique aspect of the Singaporean culture and a reflection of his Asian identity demonstrated his resistance to the prevailing ideological discourse concerning language use. This allowed him to access social and symbolic capital that is otherwise relatively inaccessible. His characterization of fellow PRC classmates using the idiom "neither fish nor fowl" highlighted their attempt to assimilate into a particular cultural model, but they ultimately ended up in a state of unclassification and at risk of losing their Asian identity.

A prime instance of how Baoyu benefited from challenging the "standard" English discourse is evident in his attainment of a leadership role typically reserved for local students, who generally had more profound knowledge of the local sociocultural norms:

> It's hard to tell whether I'm a foreigner based on the way I speak. They [the locals] thought I'm a local J2 [junior college level 2] student. Everyone trusted me during the CCA [co-curricular activity][6] ... Muddle-headedly, I was elected as the deputy chairperson [of my CCA]. (Diary 2)

[6] Co-curricular activities are a distinct characteristic of formal schooling in Singapore, offering out-of-classroom learning opportunities for students to promote character development, the acquisition of 21st-century skills and competencies, as well as overall personal growth (Guo & Liem, 2023).

Although Baoyu was aware that using Singlish in certain settings might not be appropriate and that there were contexts where formal, "standard" English was necessary, he still recognized the importance of mastering Singlish to navigate diverse social situations in Singapore.

Gongcai

Struggling to Negotiate a Capable English Language Learner Identity

As a high achiever in her previous English classrooms in China, Gongcai had received abundant praise from her teachers and classmates for "knowing many difficult and fancy words" (Interview) and getting near-perfect English test results. However, this identity position as a capable English learner was challenged after Gongcai started her secondary school in Singapore, as she found it difficult to analyze textbook passages and answer comprehension questions accurately.

These struggles resulted in Gongcai falling into the bottom 10% for her initial English common test in Singapore. Feeling frustrated, Gongcai employed a strategy to alleviate her unease and discomfort by investing in her identity as someone from a Chinese-speaking background, "I just comforted myself ... my English's already better than many of my fellow students in China ... I shouldn't push myself to reach the same level as Singaporeans" (Interview).

Gongcai's difficulties were also reflected in her struggles to adapt to other subjects taught and assessed in English. Without any prior English-medium education experience, Gongcai found it difficult to keep up with the pace of lessons and comprehend her classmates' class contributions. Additionally, her unfamiliarity with English terminologies negatively affected her exam performance, even in subjects where she had previously excelled:

> I couldn't remember the English word for hepatic portal vein [*肝门静脉*] during a biology exam. So I boldly wrote the Chinese word on the answer sheet ... Although it seemed amusing then, my heart sank when I lost marks. (Diary 1)

The language barrier Gongcai faced also constrained her engagement in her guitar ensemble CCA, as she struggled to adapt quickly to different music terminologies in English. Nevertheless, as a scholarship holder, Gongcai felt obliged to re-assert a capable student identity by maintaining strong academic records and displaying active participation in class and CCAs. Thus, to combat her identity as an incompetent English language learner in Singapore, Gongcai chose to invest a substantial amount of time in memorizing English vocabulary and listening to BBC English news in out-of-class settings.

Facing Dilemmas of Investing in English

Gongcai's primary dilemma was the challenge of investing in both her academic identity as a worthy scholar student and her linguistic identity as a competent English learner. Although these two identities were inextricably interlinked and mutually reinforcing, Gongcai perceived them as separate endeavors:

> If I spend most of my time on English, I won't have enough time to revise other subjects ... If the time allocated to each subject is the same, my English can't be significantly improved. (Diary 4)

Despite this difficulty, Gongcai managed to find a balance by prioritizing her English learning outside exam periods and shifting her focus to revising other subjects when exams approached.

The second dilemma Gongcai encountered was concerning the balance between investing in exam-focused English versus English for social purposes. Although English played a crucial role in Gongcai's everyday social scenarios (e.g., shopping, ordering food, and opening a bank account), she believed that learning English for exams was of utmost importance, as achieving good overall academic results would validate her legitimacy as a scholar student, particularly within the pragmatic environment of Singapore.

Moreover, Gongcai recounted an incident that prompted her to question the necessity of working on English for social communication, considering that Chinese could serve as a viable alternative in many social situations in Singapore:

> When I asked for directions at a subway station, the person couldn't understand me, likely due to my pronunciation. He suggested I speak Chinese if I couldn't communicate clearly in English ... So I realized my Chinese language ability can help me avoid speaking incomprehensible English. (Interview)

The last dilemma Gongcai experienced was during her investment in Singlish as a type of linguistic capital. Although knowing Singlish could help her integrate better into the local community, she was hesitant to adopt the accent, as it deviated from the mainstream English she had learned throughout her education. Additionally, she feared that Singlish would affect her performance during oral English exams, which did not recognize it as "correct" English. Lastly, Gongcai's reluctance to acquire Singlish was reinforced by her aspiration to study and work in a global environment, as she believed that Singlish would only be useful for those staying in Singapore.

The Educational Institution as an Ideological Structure Creating Scenes of Struggles

The culture and policies of Gongcai's secondary school played a significant role in mediating her English investment. Due to the school's relatively low regard for the Chinese language and the limited availability of Chinese-related events, Gongcai faced few chances to convert her Chinese linguistic capital into affordances to gain meaningful interactions with the locals:

> We're at a Christian school, so the Chinese learning atmosphere isn't strong ... We don't have any Chinese-related co-curricular activities ... The locals' Chinese is also not very good. They seem not to be interested in learning Chinese. (Interview)

Nevertheless, Gongcai's academic knowledge and learning strategies, which were acquired in a highly competitive educational environment in China, allowed her to participate in certain class activities and help the locals with their studies, primarily in science subjects. This enabled her to generate meaningful English-mediated interactional opportunities and gain recognition among her peers.

Unlike Chinese, the English learning atmosphere in her school was exceptionally strong, with many local students exhibiting high levels of English proficiency. This accentuated the English language gap between Gongcai and her classmates and heightened her frustration during English-speaking occasions. As Gongcai shared:

> When I was doing a presentation in English, the teacher and classmates would sometimes interrupt and rephrase what I said ... I think that's because I talked too slowly or used the wrong expressions. (Interview)

Despite the challenges Gongcai faced in her English language learning, she was fortunate to have benefited from favorable school policies that offered additional learning opportunities, including the provision of extra tutoring sessions to support international students. Furthermore, her school hosted various English-related events throughout the year, serving as a potentially valuable resource for improving her language skills. However, Gongcai soon discovered that there was an unwritten rule governing the selection of students to participate in English-related competitions:

> Many English competitions automatically exclude foreigners like us. As they're related to class honor, participation opportunities will be reserved for local students ... But as to math competitions like SMO [Singapore Mathematical Olympiad], they required all PRC scholar students to participate. (Interview)

Discussion

The findings of the two cases have illustrated the varied, complex, and agentive ways in which Baoyu and Gongcai invested in English learning and English-mediated interactions with local Singaporeans. The two participants developed differential L2 investment trajectories, which were shaped by their attempts to reconstruct competent language learner identities, influenced by their desire to realize capital conversion, and conditioned by prevailing language ideologies and institutional policies. In this sense, this study testifies to the significance of language in shaping the socialization experiences of cross-border students observed in previous relevant studies (e.g., Liu et al.,

2022; Sung, 2020). Three major themes emerging from the findings should be discussed with reference to broader literature.

First, both participants were eager to establish their desired identities in the new sociocultural field by utilizing different strategies. Baoyu was aware of the potential negative positioning of PRC scholars by Singaporean peers even before school began. He chose to resist such positioning by incorporating Singlish, a perceived marker of Singaporean identity, into his existing repertoire to gain acceptance by the local community and secure a legitimate status. In line with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Chacko, 2021; Lu, 2020, 2021; Yang, 2014b, 2017), the use of Singlish was found to be an opportunity for Baoyu in his endeavors to claim the right to speak and the right to be heard in the new context. Contrastingly, although Gongcai aimed to rebuild her desired identity as a capable English learner in the current social field, she struggled to achieve it and experienced a sense of alienation due to her relatively low English proficiency in comparison to her Singaporean peers, resembling the PRC participants in Chacko's (2021) research. This led Gongcai to activate a Chinese speaker identity to cope with her anxiety arising from identity struggles. Furthermore, to meet the expectations of her scholar identity, Gongcai made considerable efforts to utilize target language resources accessible to her, resonating with the agentive actions enacted by the participants in Cao and Newton's (2019) study.

Second, the findings suggest that even though both participants leveraged different forms of capital they already possessed to engage in particular social practices, the level of agentive participation was contingent upon the institutional environment and the local cultural values (e.g., the prevalent pragmatism in Singapore). For example, aligning with Gu's (2016) study on PRC university students in Hong Kong, Baoyu's Chinese linguistic and cultural capital proved to be an asset in the local context, as it generated interest among his local peers and opened up English-mediated socialization for him. This differs significantly from Yang's (2017) findings, where Singaporean students showed no curiosity or desire to learn from PRC students' culture. In contrast, although Gongcai could utilize her Chinese language skills to circumvent the need to use English in daily interactions, she struggled to harness her Chinese linguistic capital to interact with local students due to the lack of recognition of Chinese language proficiency as a valuable type of capital in her institutional setting. In fact, Baoyu encountered a similar situation when he began his studies in junior college, where learning Chinese was no longer compulsory, and thus, the locals attached less value to his Chinese linguistic capital due to limited practical returns. Such encounters highlight the idea that "[a]s the rules of the game vary in different fields ... the value of one's capital also shifts" (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 44). Despite these challenges, both participants were still able to utilize their academic capital to create social opportunities and consolidate their identities as competent students, facilitated by the shared cultural values of both China and Singapore that prize academic excellence (Yang, 2016).

Building on the second, which highlighted how ideologies operated to influence the two cases' capital accumulation and conversion, the third theme takes a step further by substantiating the case that prevailing ideological forces and school policies impacted participants' language investment. While Baoyu's investment was promoted by the ideology of English as a global language, Gongcai viewed English as having economic value in her future career pursuits. Similar to the findings in Sung's (2020) study, Gongcai's investment in English was also impacted by her school's culture and language policies. Although her school provided support for international students' English learning, pragmatic constraints within the institution restricted their involvement in certain English-related events, thereby inhibiting Gongcai's investment opportunities. When considering which type of English to invest in, Baoyu made a conscious effort to learn and use Singlish as a way of attaining symbolic capital in the new field, such as friendship (Norton Peirce, 1995), despite prevalent discourses that labeled Singlish as "non-standard" English. However, coinciding with the respondents' views in Steele's (2008) study, Gongcai's perspective was significantly influenced by the "standard" language ideology that had been instilled through her previous education, leading to her reluctance to adopt Singlish. Furthermore, Gongcai's decision was reinforced by the widespread rhetoric of pragmatism, which incentivized her to not just prioritize English for exams over communication purposes but also adhere to "standard" English for the sake of achieving better exam results. This observation aligns with Yang's (2017) findings that practical academic grades overshadowed the

need for integration among PRC students. Ultimately, participants' experiences were shaped not only by ideological mechanisms influencing their identities as legitimate English speakers (Darvin, 2017) but also by the level of agency they exercised in utilizing linguistic resources to establish legitimacy in the new sociocultural environment.

Conclusion

Drawing on Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, this case study explored the investment of two PRC scholar students in English learning and English-mediated practices in Singapore. The study illustrates how both participants invested in English learning and English-mediated social interactions by taking different pathways. Their investment was influenced by their desire to re-establish legitimate identities and attain valuable capital in the new sociocultural environment. Prevailing ideologies and institutional policies also played a significant role in their language investment experiences.

This study has extended our understanding of PRC scholar students' English learning by transcending the confines of a traditional classroom-based setting and encompassing the dynamic sphere of out-of-class contexts. In contrast to previous studies (e.g., Dimmock & Ong, 2010; Yang, 2014b) that touched upon the language aspect, our study has investigated in-depth the mechanism underpinning PRC scholar students' investment in English learning and social practices with the mediating constructs of identity, capital, and ideology. Furthermore, this study has addressed the research gap by focusing on the experiences of PRC scholar students studying in secondary schools and junior colleges.

This study makes significant theoretical contributions in three key areas. Firstly, it highlights the role of social networks in shaping learners' investment practice, providing insights into the social dynamics and support systems that influence language learning experiences. Secondly, it delves deeper into the influence of cultural capital on learners' investment by exploring how prior knowledge, cultural beliefs, and values impact their perceptions and choices. This adds further nuances to the interplay between identity, capital, and ideology in study-abroad contexts. Lastly, it emphasizes the role of agency in learners' investment strategies and examines how they challenge dominant ideologies and navigate sociocultural dynamics. These contributions altogether enhance the overall understanding of learner investment in the study-abroad context.

This research holds practical implications for schools and educational policymakers in Singapore to support Chinese foreign talent students' English learning experiences. For instance, in view of the crucial role Singlish plays in negotiating one's legitimate membership in Singapore, schools could deliver lessons on Singlish, its historical background, and national significance to help the target group see beyond the practical value of Singlish. Given the potential convertible value of the target group's cultural capital, Chinese language events and student-implemented tutorials could be hosted to create more interactional opportunities for the target group and local students. Considering the pragmatic culture in influencing the target group's English investment, policymakers could alleviate this trend by placing more emphasis on bond-building to facilitate further English-mediated socialization for students from China.

Given the limited scale of this study, future research could benefit from adopting an ethnographic design, which can better capture the dynamic nature of the constructs explored. Additionally, multiple data collection points can be used to generate more insights into participants' language investment dynamics as a result of their increased length of stay in Singapore and how they negotiate linguistic and cultural capital (e.g., increased intercultural competence) in the naturalistic context (see Liu et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023b; Zhang & Liu, 2022; Zhang & Liu, 2023). Lastly, future studies may consider exploring different groups of international students in Singapore or similar contexts to further enrich our understanding of the socially situated language learning of cross-border students in multilingual, non-anglophone study-abroad contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Diary Guide

These points of reflection offer guidance for recording your experiences and thoughts concerning your language learning and social interactions. So, it is not necessary to address each point in every entry, nor should you feel obliged to exclude other aspects of your experiences. It is recommended to spend approximately 15-20 minutes writing a diary entry. While a minimum of four entries between ______ and _______ is encouraged, you are welcome to submit more if you want. Your diary entries may be in written, audio, or video format, and can be in English, Chinese, or a combination of both languages.

Points of Reflection

1. Have you been experiencing language-related advantages, disadvantages, difficulties, or opportunities with regard to:
    - English-mediated interactions and interpersonal relationships with others in and/or outside schools.
    - Conducting or joining non-academic social and cultural events in and/or outside schools.
    - English-medium classes and Chinese-medium classes (if this applies)
        - Can you see any similarities and/or differences in your language learning practices and language-mediated interactions?
2. Have you been experiencing the following situations, and what are your thoughts or reactions:
    - Conversations, discussions, or events where you use and/or hear more than one language.
        - For what purpose(s) do you and/or others switch languages?
    - Deciding to work with or be involved with a particular group due to language concerns.
    - Speaking to other students and/or teachers in one language and getting their responses in another.
    - Speaking to the same students and/or teachers in different languages due to different contexts or demands.
3. Why and how have you been learning English?
    - What role does/will English play in your current and future life?
    - How do social interactions play a role in your English learning?
    - What do you think about the language learning environment in your school and/or in Singapore?
    - What resources (e.g., social, cultural, economic) have you been drawing on to access English learning opportunities?
4. Any other forms of hardship or good news you would like to share.

Appendix 2

Interview Guide

For Baoyu

1. 在日记中，你提到了自己讲Singlish。你是出于什么原因学习并运用Singlish的？
   In your diary, you mentioned that you spoke Singlish. What was the reason for learning and using Singlish?

2. 你觉得讲Singlish对你在新加坡的学习和生活有什么影响？跟你交流的人有什么反应？
   What impact do you think speaking Singlish has had on your studies and life in Singapore? How have the people you communicated with reacted?

3. 你觉得中国奖学金学生的这个身份对你的英语学习或者用英语交流有什么影响？
   How do you think being a scholarship holder from China has affected your English learning or your English-mediated communication?

4. 除了你日记中提到的，你的中文语言能力还为你带来了哪些好处？是否曾经有让你处于劣势的情况？
   Besides what you have mentioned in your diaries, what other benefits have your Chinese language skills brought you? Have there been any situations where it put you at a disadvantage?

5. 你觉得在中学和JC的语言学习和交流氛围怎么样？在以英语为媒介语的社交互动的机会和经历有什么不同?
   What do you think about the language learning atmosphere in your secondary school and junior college? Were there any differences in your experiences and opportunities for English-mediated social interactions?

6. 除了日记中提到的，你有没有做任何其他努力来提高你的英语水平？
   Apart from what is mentioned in your diary, have you made any other efforts to improve your English?

7. 你认为自己目前要花时间和精力去学习和运用英语的动机是什么？英语在你目前的生活中扮演什么角色？
   Why do you invest time and energy into learning and using English? What role do you think English plays in your current life?

8. 你认为英语在你未来的生活中会扮演什么角色？例如上大学或参加工作后。
   What role do you think English will play in your future life, such as during your time in college or in your career?

For Gongcai

1. 你在日记中提到了在中国和在新加坡英语学习的区别。你能详细说说你之前在中国的教育中，什么样的学生被认为是好的英语学习者吗？
   You mentioned in your diary the differences in English learning back in China and in Singapore. Can you elaborate what is considered a good English learner in your previous education in China?

2. 你如何看待日记中提到的你和本地学生英语水平的差距，以及有没有做什么来应对这样的差距？
   How do you view the English proficiency gap between you and the local students you mentioned in your diary, and have you taken any steps to address this gap?

3. 你觉得中国奖学金学生的这个身份对你的英语学习或者用英语交流有什么影响？
   How do you think being a scholarship holder from China has affected your English learning or your English-mediated communication?

4. 你在日记中提到说对Singlish有些抗拒，可以展开说说为什么会有这个想法吗？
   You mentioned in your diary that you resisted picking up Singlish. Can you elaborate on why you have this thought?

5. 在日记里你提到小组合作的时候，你们班内的中国学生们更倾向于与中国人一组。你一般是怎么选择的？
   In the diary, you mentioned that when it comes to group work, the Chinese students in your class prefer working with fellow Chinese. How do you usually make your choices?

6. 在日记里你提到了在学习英语和其他科目上时间分配的问题。你目前是如何平衡的？
   In your diary, you mentioned the issue of time allocation between learning English and other subjects. How do you currently balance them?

7. 你觉得你的学校的语言学习氛围怎么样？对你的英语学习和交流有什么影响？
   What do you think about the language learning atmosphere in your school？What impact does it have on your English learning and communication?

8. 你认为英语在你未来的生活中会扮演什么角色？例如上大学或参加工作后。
   What role do you think English will play in your future life, such as during your time in college or in your career?

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Declarations of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing fnancial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Statement of Originality

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