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An investigation of English learning motivation among Chinese undergraduates and postgraduates

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The study reported in this paper employed Dörnyei's L2 motivational self system to investigate the correlation between motivational variables and L2 English learning, both within and between undergraduates and postgraduates. 210 university students (including undergraduate and postgraduate students) from two mainland Chinese universities completed online questionnaires and 7 of them were interviewed based on the L2 motivational self system. The results showed that students at both undergraduate and (post)graduate levels of study had a generally favourable disposition toward English learning, although the higher the education level of the student, the higher the importance of the ideal L2 self domain (and the notion of instrumentality-promotion within this domain) for English learning. Significant correlations were also found for undergraduate students between English learning achievement and ideal L2 self, as well as English learning achievement and attitudes to L2 learning, suggesting the clearer L2 self-image and more positive L2 learning attitude an undergraduate has, the higher the level of achievement in English learning they are likely to obtain.

Keywords: L2 motivational self system; Chinese English language learners; motivation disposition; differences of English learning motivation, motivational variables; English learning achievement; China

Introduction: Motivation and L2 acquisition

This paper examines how learner-internal motivational variables correlate with the English language learning experience and achievement of tertiary students at undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) levels of study at two mainland Chinese universities. According to Ushioda and Dörnyei (2012), the current phase of research into motivation and second language (L2) learning is the socio-dynamic period, concentrating on the contextual and dynamic perspectives of learner motivation and their effect on L2 learning. Within this period, the currently dominant model is the L2 motivational self system (L2MSS) defined by Dörnyei (2005, 2009), which has reframed previous conceptions of L2 motivation (e.g. the socio-educational model of Gardner, 1985) to focus on the relationship between motivation and contemporary theories of self and identity. Dörnyei (2005, 2009) proposed that successful L2 learning is dependent on the following motivational concerns:

1. The ideal L2 self: which concerns the ideal image that L2 users desire for themselves in the future. It can motivate an L2 learner to work harder in order to shorten the distance between their actual and ideal self-images. The ideal L2 self "can be used to explain the motivational set-up in diverse learning contexts…and it

would also be suitable for the study of the motivational basis of language globalization" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 104).

2. The ought-to L2 self: which concerns the attributes L2 users believe they should possess in order to meet expectations and avoid negative consequences. Dörnyei subdivides Gardner's (1985) notion of instrumentality, or a learners' practical motives for L2 learning, into instrumentality-promotion (concerning personal goals to become successful) and instrumentality-prevention (concerning duties and obligations) within the domain of ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self respectively (Dörnyei, 2009).

3. The L2 learning experience: which concerns motives that are situation-specific and associated with the L2 user's learning environment and experience.

The L2MSS has been validated by a number of large-scale empirical studies in various L2 learning environments, beginning with Hungarian (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2006). Kormos and Csizér (2008) carried out studies among three age groups (again for Hungarian), providing empirical evidence for the validity and reliability of the ideal L2 self concept in L2MSS for those of different ages. They found older language learners (university students and adult learners) were more motivated by their ideal L2 selves. Other studies carried out in a range of diverse contexts such as Ryan (2009) in Japan and Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009) in Japan, China and Iran, confirmed that the L2MSS is not country-specific but is reliable in different educational contexts. Research based on the L2MSS "saw a spike" from 2011 (Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015, p. 153), with studies exploring the relationships between ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, L2 learning experience and other variables (e.g. Busse, 2013; Papi, 2010), the effect of the L2MSS and potential context-specific motivational constructs (e.g. Alshahrani, 2016; Islam, Lamb, & Chambers, 2013), and the motivational structures of L2 learners from different educational contexts (e.g. Ghanizadeh & Rostami, 2015). Other research into motivation using the L2MSS framework has investigated differences in L2 motivation across students of different education levels. For example, longitudinal research on junior high school students investigated changes to L2 motivation over a 20-month period, showing that participants' attitudes to formal learning gradually deteriorated while their desire to learn English and to become successful in English did change (Lamb, 2007). Ushioda (2001) studied university students' L2 motivational evolution over 16 months and found that learners' subsequent involvement in learning is influenced by their learning experiences and personal goals, with a number of effective motivational techniques identified.

While these studies serve to validate the L2MSS as a valuable measure of inter- and intra-learner variance in L2 acquisition, there is currently a dearth of L2MSS studies focusing on the mainland Chinese context, to which we now turn our attention.

L2 motivation research in China

L2 motivation research in China began over three decades ago, and during the last decade, studies conducted in China (including mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan) and studies investigating Chinese learners outside China accounted for the largest amount of L2 motivation research (Boo et al., 2015). China, with the largest population of English language learners globally, has attracted a large amount of research regarding motivation and L2 learning, yet the majority of this research has used traditional models of motivation (e.g. Gardner, 1985) that have been challenged in light of ongoing developments in L2MSS research (e.g. Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2003; Y.

Wang, 2010; Zhao, 2012). For example, Y. Wang (2010) employed Gardner's model to investigate L2 motivation among first-year polytechnic university students and Zhao (2012) used this model to explore motivation types and factors impacting motivation of non-English majors. Research on Chinese L2 English learners using the L2MSS is more limited and has been conducted primarily by Western scholars, such as You and Dörnyei (2014) who conducted a nationwide stratified survey among over 10,000 secondary school and university students. Other studies have looked at Chinese L2 English studies outside of China, such as Magid (2011) who used the L2MSS model with Chinese international students in the UK, intervening in their English learning by enhancing their vision of ideal L2 self. However, further studies by Chinese scholars on students within mainland China are warranted.

Indeed, Chinese researchers may be beginning to take a more modern approach to the study of L2 motivation. For example, a large-scale study (Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2007) investigated the relationship between motivation types and the self-identity changes of university students, and proposed seven motivation types correlated with self-identity. Recent research has also investigated the English learning motivations and learning strategies of Chinese students in China using the L2MSS, with Xu's (2011) study showing that L2 motivation is significantly related to L2 learning strategies and that more highly motivated students tend to use a wider range of strategies. Gan (2009) compared the language learning attitudes, motivation and strategies of mainland university students with their counterparts in Hong Kong, suggesting that learning contexts and social environments direct students' attitudes towards learning strategies and motivation. In terms of the correlation between motivational variables and positive outcomes for L2 learning, Li and Pan (2009) investigated the relationships between integrative motivation, instrumental motivation and achievement among English majors and found that instrumental motivation has evident influence on both high and low achievers, while higher achievers have higher integrative motivation than low achievers.

Rationale for present study

As is widely acknowledged, age- and education status-related differences account for a large source of variance in L2 motivation (Kormos & Csizér, 2008). For example, younger students tend not to have as much interaction with native English speakers as older students do, potentially resulting in a weaker understanding of the importance of using English in later life (Csizér & Kormos, 2009). However, although university students have accounted for the largest number of research participants in the last decade (Boo et al., 2015) there are currently few studies focusing on the differences between L2 motivation of undergraduates (UG) and postgraduates (PG) in mainland China. Further investigation of differences in L2 motivation between students at different levels of education is important and can contribute to more specific, tailored pedagogical suggestions for language learning and teaching. Therefore, this paper employs the L2MSS model to investigate differences among UG and PG students from two mainland Chinese universities in terms of their English language motivation disposition and the correlation between that disposition and their English learning outcomes. The following research questions are posed:

1. What is the general motivational disposition of Chinese university students regarding L2 English learning?
2. Are there differences in the motivational disposition toward L2 English learning between mainland Chinese UG and PG students?

3. Is there any correlation between motivational variables and L2 English learning achievement within and between mainland Chinese UG and PG students?

Methodology

Participants
    All participants were from two mainland Chinese universities in eastern China, one 'key' university and one 'ordinary' university. Key universities are the top-151 ranked Chinese universities, whereas ordinary universities are considered to be in the second-tier. In total, 210 students completed an online questionnaire survey, and after elimination of incomplete returns, the final sample size was 208. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 7 of the participants who indicated their willingness to be interviewed at the end of the questionnaire. The distribution of participants across the two universities and their educational levels can be seen in Table 1. The demographic data of the interviewees is shown in Table 2 (pseudonyms are used).

Table 1. Questionnaire sample

Education Levels	University	Number	Percent
UG	Ordinary	63	30.3
	Key	60	28.8
PG	Key	85	40.9
Total		208	100

Table 2. Background information about interviewees

Pseudonyms	Gender	Education levels	Majors
Zuo	M	PG	Neuroscience
Bi	F	PG	Communication Engineering
Wang	F	PG	International Business and Management
Zhou	M	UG	Bioengineering
Liu	F	UG	Accounting
Chen	M	UG	Electronic & Computer Engineering
Sun	M	UG	Electronic Information Engineering

Instruments

The online questionnaire (Appendix A) contained two parts and was presented bilingually in Chinese and English. The first part pertained to the participants' background information as well as their English learning achievement while at university. English achievement was measured by participants' scores on CET-4 (College English Test Band-4) which, in both universities, students are required to pass to graduate. Since CET-4 excludes English speaking, the English achievement investigated in this paper only represents listening, reading and writing. The second part of the questionnaire was comprised of 27 five-point Likert scale items (from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) concerning the three components of the L2MSS (ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, L2 learning experience), all adapted from You and Dörnyei's (2014) L2MSS study (Table 3), and one question inviting participants to be interviewed. While You and Dörnyei's (2014) version uses a 6-point scale, a 5-point scale was adopted in the present study to incorporate a true mid-point. This was done in response to reported difficulty with selecting an answer in a pilot study conducted with 6 students. The Cronbach's alpha score of the final questionnaire data is .949, with alpha scores of $\alpha \geq 0.9$ considered "excellent" (as recommended by Kline, 2000, p. 13).

Table 3. Motivational variables investigated

Variables	Number of items	Sample items
Ideal L2 self	4	I can imagine myself in the future giving an English speech successfully to the public.
-Instrumentality-promotion	3	Studying English is important to me because I'm planning to study abroad.
-Cultural interest	3	I think learning English is important to learn more about the culture and art of its speakers.
-Travelling	3	Studying English is important to me because without English I won't be able to travel a lot.
Ought-to L2 self	3	I consider learning English important because my teachers think that I should do it.
-Instrumentality-prevention	4	Studying English is necessary for me because I don't want to get a poor score or a fail mark in English proficiency tests (IELTS, BEC, CET4/6,etc.).
-Parental expectations	3	My parents/family believe that I must study English to be an educated person.
Language learning experience (attitudes to L2 learning)	4	I always look/looked forward to English classes.

The interview questions (Appendix B), designed mainly from the results of the initial questionnaire, concerned interviewees' self-rated English proficiency, major motives during each English learning stage and the three motivational categories of the L2MSS.

Procedure

The online questionnaire was administered via *SurveyMonkey*, piloted in May 2016, and administered to students at the two universities by convenience and snowball sampling in June 2016, while follow-up interviews were conducted in July of that year. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 24.0, including descriptive statistics, ANOVA (one-way analysis of variance), and Pearson correlation. All interviews were carried out in Mandarin and audio-recorded for later analysis. The recordings of interviews were first transcribed in Chinese and then translated into English where required, with all sentences restructured to be complete and cohesive. NVivo version 8.0 was used for coding, highlighting and categorizing the transcriptions.

Results

Validation of the L2MSS

As shown by results of Pearson Correlation (Table 4), a significant correlation (r=.76, effect size=.58) was observed between ideal L2 self and instrumentality-promotion and this correlation was stronger than that found between ought-to L2 self and instrumentality-promotion (r=.56, effect size=.31). In contrast, a significant correlation (r=.77, effect size=.59) was shown between ought-to L2 self and instrumentality-prevention, and was stronger than that between ideal L2 self and instrumentality-prevention (r=.66, effect size=.44). In addition, the correlation (r=.54, effect size=.29) between instrumentality-promotion and instrumentality-prevention was lower than both correlations between ideal L2 self and instrumentality-promotion and between ought-to L2 self and instrumentality-prevention. Therefore, an important part of Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2MSS was validated, that is, instrumental factors belong to the former two components in the model, with instrumentality-promotion more related to ideal L2 self and instrumentality-prevention to ought-to L2 self.

Motivational dispositions of the subjects

First, as can be seen in Table 5, the mean values of the whole sample range from 2.96 to 3.92 on a 5-point scale with all eight scales exceeding the midpoint 2.50, suggesting a generally favourable tendency toward English learning among the investigated subsamples. In the interview, three female interviewees shared similar experiences of a strong favourable disposition throughout the English learning process, while Sun had lost interest in English learning for many years:

> When I started learning English at the third grade in primary school, I felt curious and often talked with my foreign teacher, although in very simple expressions. But then, when entering secondary school, I lost my interest and just wanted to pass most of the exams (Sun, UG).

Indeed, all participants complained that their secondary school English teachers "worked so hard just hoping that the class could performed excellent in exams" (Wang), and they tended to feel that they were "forced" to learn and thus became indifferent in participating in the English class. Lamb (2007) also found that students' negative feelings towards English teachers tended to result in worse attitudes towards formal learning. Fortunately, however, many students kept their interest in English and obtained a high degree of proficiency (e.g. Wang and Bi).

Second, Table 5 shows that instrumentality-promotion (M=3.92, SD=.92), within the domain of ideal L2 self, is ranked the highest among all the mean values of the

whole sample, and significant differences (p<.001) can be seen in instrumentality-promotion between UG and PG students (effect size=.13), showing that PG students are more motivated by instrumental promotion than UG students. We can thus surmise that upon entering postgraduate study, Chinese students' instrumentality-promotion becomes significantly higher than during their undergraduate study. To try to explain this difference, participants were asked "How much do you think English matters for your current, future study and work?" The following are typical responses:

> English is vital to my studies and career. I read academic English journals every day, plan to go abroad for post-doctoral study, and my future job in neuroscience definitely needs proficiency in English (Zuo, PG).

> I want to find a job in a multi-national company, which means English matters a lot for my job in the future (Wang, PG).

> I don't know, and I even don't know what kind of job I can find. To be frank, I don't think my future job will need much in the way of English. (Liu, UG).

It is common in mainland China that parents choose majors in undergraduate study for their children (Li & Pan, 2009), but most interviewees (e.g. Zuo and Liu) said they would choose their favourite field themselves although it is worth noting that some UG interviewees (e.g. Liu) were confused about the role of English in their future careers. Indeed, more time is generally required for younger students to crystalize their career goals (Ushioda, 2001), while PG interviewees are relatively clearer about their career goals, and are thus more favourable to the role of English in pursuit of that goal.

Third, Table 5 reveals that the highest ranked source of motivation was obtained for the ideal L2 self domain (M=3.81, SD=.96), which seems to support the result in You and Dörnyei's (2014) research that the ideal L2 self plays the most important role in English learning among Chinese English language learners. However, in terms of the differences between UG and PG students, significant differences (p<.001) were shown in their responses to the importance of the ideal L2 self (effect size =.82), with PGs reporting significantly higher mean values than UGs for this domain generally as well as the variables within this domain, in line with Kormos and Csizér (2008). The interviews support the quantitative findings:

> I can image myself giving speeches at international neuroscience conferences and chatting with experts in this field from around the world. I decided to keep digging in this field therefore I am strongly motivated to learn English (Zuo, PG).

> I'm not satisfied with my English because I aim for more fluent communication with foreigners, no matter whether they are English native speakers or those who speak English as a second language (Bi, PG).

> I don't think I will ever communicate fluently, and I don't often have the chance to chat with foreigners. (Zhou, UG).

Two PG interviewees, Zuo and Bi, both demonstrated a strong ideal L2 self image and understood the role that English played to achieve their goals, while Zhou, lacking the chance to meet native English speaking foreigners, was less certain.

Table 4. Correlations between motivational variables

		Ideal L2 Self	Instrumentality-promotion	Cultural interest	Travelling	Ought-to L2 self	Instrumentality-prevention	Parental expectation
Instrumentality-promotion	r	.76**	1					
	Effect size[a]	.58						
Cultural interest	r	.66**	.58**	1				
	Effect size[a]	.44	.34					
Travelling	r	.59**	.56**	.56**	1			
	Effect size[a]	.35	.31	.31				
Ought-to L2 self	r	.62**	.56**	.40**	.54**	1		
	Effect size[a]	.39	.31	.16	.30			
Instrumentality prevention	r	.66**	.54**	.48**	.49**	.77**	1	
	Effect size[a]	.44	.29	.23	.24	.59		
Parental expectation	r	.48**	.39**	.36**	.54**	.62**	.55**	1
	Effect size[a]	.23	.15	.13	.29	.38	.31	
Language learning experience	r	.68**	.56**	.60**	.49**	.62**	.69**	.40**
	Effect size[a]	.47	.32	.36	.24	.39	.47	.16

**. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).
a. r^2

Table 5. Comparison of motivational variables between two education levels

	M(SD)			F	Sig.	Effect size[b]	Sequence
	Whole sample (n=208)	UG (n=123)	PG (n=85)				
Ideal L2 Self	3.81(.96)	3.58(1.07)	4.14(.66)	18.46*	.000	.08	UG<PG
Instrumentality-promotion	3.92(.92)	3.64(.98)	4.31(.64)	30.69*	.000	.13	UG<PG
Cultural interest	3.87(.93)	3.72(.99)	4.09(.78)	8.64	.004	.04	UG<PG
Travelling	3.58(1.01)	3.55(1.07)	3.62(.93)	.27	.603	.00	UG<PG
Ought-to L2 self	3.23(1.08)	3.22(1.17)	3.24(.93)	.01	.897	.00	UG=PG
Instrumentality-prevention	3.50(.93)	3.44(.99)	3.57(.84)	.94	.333	.01	UG<PG
Parental expectation	2.96(.94)	2.94(.92)	3.00(.96)	.18	.676	.00	UG=PG
Language learning experience (attitudes to L2 learning)	3.34(.96)	3.23(1.03)	3.49(.83)	3.64	.058	.02	UG<PG

*. p<.001.

b. Eta Square

Parental expectation (M=2.96, SD=.94) within the domain of ought-to L2 self is the lowest-ranked motivational variable in the whole sample, although PG students gave higher overall mean marks than UG students, which was an unexpected finding given the higher ages of PGs. Although similar findings were reported in some research (e.g. Li & Pan, 2009; You & Dörnyei, 2014), qualitative data is required for a comprehensive understanding, and when asked about whether their parents encouraged or required them to learn English, the UG interviewees responded:

> My parents do require me to study hard but they don't worry about my English, because I can always get high grades in English exams and they know I like English and want to study abroad (Chen, UG).

> My parents often ask me to study hard, especially English. But I just don't listen, and my classmates also don't like to follow their parents' expectations (Sun, UG).

Sun's data supports the finding that today's Chinese university students tend not to be as traditional as expected by researchers (see, for example, You & Dörnyei, 2014).

Correlations between English achievement and motivational variables
Meaningful significant correlations can be discerned (which according to Dörnyei, 2007, is when r>.3) between both ideal L2 self (r=.37, effect size=.14) and attitudes to L2 learning (r=.39, effect size=.15) and English achievement (Table 6). University students who are more motivated by an ideal English user image tend to score higher in English exams, and in a similar vein, positive attitudes towards English learning may be one of the predictors of high English grades. As for the interview, those who scored high in CET-4 and self-rated as high in English proficiency tend to have a positive and clear L2 self. And when asked about their English learning experience and attitudes, they shared happy and enjoyable experiences of English learning that were often associated with respect for their English teachers, and this is consistent with the findings of Lamb (2007) and Ushioda (2001).

When viewed by education level, the findings show that the UG group displayed a similar trend to the whole sample, with meaningful correlations between English achievement and ideal L2 self (r=.35, effect size=.12), and attitudes to L2 learning (r=.38, effect size=.14). Further insight on this phenomenon among UGs comes from the qualitative data:

> My secondary English teacher told me that I can be the class representative if I got full marks in English. I think it really worked for me, and now I can perform great in English without hard-work because I have laid a solid foundation (Liu, UG).

> I can get high grades in English exams, but I don't think I like English. It's like a habit of mine to always aim for the best, especially in exams (Zhou, UG).

While Liu seems to be more instrumentally motivated, Zhou is primarily but unconsciously motivated by the ideal image of the kind of English user he could be. Zhou's experience was not unique. When asked whether they could imagine themselves using English to communicate or solve problems in the future, most other interviewees hesitated, although they eventually answered positively.
In contrast, the results of the PG group showed no significant positive correlation between motivational variables and English achievement. This is probably because achievement in this study is measured via CET-4 scores which exclude a speaking

Table 6. Correlations between motivational variables and English achievement

	English achievement whole sample (n=208)			English achievement UG (n=123)			English achievement PG (n=85)		
	r	Sig. (2-tailed)	Effect size[a]	r	Sig. (2-tailed)	Effect size[a]	r	Sig. (2-tailed)	Effect size[a]
Ideal L2 self	.37**	0	.14	.35**	.03	.12	.02	.12	0
Instrumentality-promotion	.22**	0	.05	.15	.04	.02	-.22*	.45	.05
Cultural interest	.27**	0	.07	.29**	0	.08	-.09	.46	0
Travelling	.14*	.26	.02	.19*	.53	.04	0	.41	0
Ought-to L2 self	.19**	.51	.04	.25**	.47	.06	.01	.89	0
Instrumentality prevention	.23**	.81	.05	.22*	.91	.05	.07	.68	0
Parental expectation	.14	.52	.02	.20*	.64	.04	.03	.79	0
Language learning experience (attitudes to L2 learning)	.39**	0	.15	.38**	0	.14	-.07	.05	.02

*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).
**. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).
a. r2.

0

component, but all PG interviewees said they concentrated more on improving their speaking skills:

> I don't have pressure of getting high scores in English exams now, and gradually realized that good spoken English is more important for my pursuit of career (Wang, PG).

PG students clearly considered speaking as necessary for their future careers, a marked shift from their history of learning English for the purpose of passing exams during their undergraduate studies.

Discussion

This research has validated an important part of Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2MSS concerning instrumentality, yielding three main groups of findings in pursuit of the research questions posed.

First, descriptive statistics showed that the investigated population displayed a general positive inclination towards English learning that was also observed in You & Dörnyei's (2014) nationwide research. The ideal L2 self domain and instrumentality-promotion within this domain impose a principal influence on English learning, while parental expectation was the lowest-ranked motive. This result apparently contradicts You & Dörnyei's (2014) finding that instrumentality (both promotional and preventional) is not a principal motivational factor. However, the importance of instrumentality-promotion is likely to result from the fact that though the English education system in China has been reformed to some extent (and is still under reformation), traditional exam-oriented teaching has not lost sovereignty (Chen, Warden, & Chang, 2005). Though it seems that parental expectation did not have much influence on the investigated population, family influence is still important in children's study in mainland China (Magid, 2011). During the interviews, more than one interviewee showed that they would primarily consider their parents or family members' suggestions when choosing majors and jobs. Given the above, the general positive appraisal of the importance of English within the L2MSS domain by mainland Chinese students shows that students' motivation to learn English between UG and PG students is high.

Second, the reported differences in motivational disposition between UGs and PGs that appear mainly in the ideal L2 self domain (especially in instrumentality-promotion) deserve further attention. As the education level increases, ideal L2 self and instrumentality-promotion become more important factors for motivating learners. As stable a self-image as university students have, it is still flexible, and changes in it are still to be expected (Carlson, 1965). Thus, PGs show a clearer understanding of what role English will play in their future study and work, and why they regard English as a practical tool for their development, whereas UGs are more likely to be struggling to consider which kind of job to choose in the future. The trend for the ideal L2 self between these groups indicates that the ideal L2 self image plays a stronger role in the L2 learning motivation of PG students than UG students. A similar phenomenon was shown in the findings of research comparing the motivational disposition of secondary school and university students (e.g. Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Kormos & Csizér, 2008; You & Dörnyei, 2014). This can be explained in that along with the increasing levels of education, students may have more opportunities to interact in English wherever English plays a major part in international communication (Csizér & Kormos, 2009; You & Dörnyei, 2014). Here then, the effect of China's increasingly international

outlook (with concomitant importance of the role of English in that outlook) does appear to be making its way into the PG experiences of students in mainland China, although perhaps more work has to be done to ensure this same international outlook can spread to students at the UG level.

Third, significant correlations were found between English achievement (albeit excluding speaking) and ideal L2 self, as well as achievement and attitudes to L2 learning in the UG group, whereas no meaningful correlations were found for the PG group. The tendency shown by UGs was also shown in other research conducted in China. For example, Li & Pan's (2009) study indicated that high English achievers have greater integrative motivation, which according to Dörnyei (2005, 2009) is part of the ideal L2 self. In another study, F. Wang (2008) found that internal fulfilment regulation (which means students "have recognized the importance of English learning and internalized it into their self-value system", p. 643), was positively correlated with English achievement. Also, internal fulfilment regulation partly overlaps with ideal L2 self. It is worth noting that when asked about attitudes toward English learning, most of the UG interviewees mentioned they "Study hard as a habit", which seems to be the internalisation of ought-to L2 self to ideal L2 self. Future investigation is required to explore whether "Study hard as a habit" is a potential Chinese-specific motivational variable and whether this variable belongs to the ideal L2 self. However, the results for PGs are less conclusive, given that the measure of English achievement used in this research is that of CET-4 scores which exclude speaking. Rather, the PG interviewees preferred to concentrate their efforts on improving their oral English.

Conclusion

Despite its modest sample size and its dependence on participants' CET-4 scores to measure English achievement, this study has been able to show that while mainland Chinese tertiary students are generally favourable to English as evidenced by their reported levels of motivation, differences between education levels must be taken into account when discussing tertiary students as a whole in this context. We particularly recommend that teachers of undergraduates do more to promote internationalization within their confines, as well as expanding their international outlook. Both approaches should potentially serve to increase students' motivation to pursue the study of English. Moreover, at least for UGs in this context, English achievement is strongly positively correlated with ideal L2 self and attitudes to L2 learning. With this mind, teachers of UGs should work on improving their teaching and learning contexts so as to promote the value of English beyond the standardized tests required for graduation. In doing so, they are likely to also increase the actual performance of students on those tests, as well as increase students' job prospects immediately following graduation.

A large-scale cross-regional study is required for more reliable results, and for the investigation and examination of the potential Chinese-specific motivational variable "Study hard as a habit". Ideally it would include the additional criterion measure of intended learning effort, and a well-designed English proficiency test (e.g. IELTS) as the measurement tool.

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Appendix A. Online questionnaire

English Learners Questionnaire (English version)
This questionnaire is designed for a study of Chinese university students' English learning motivation. The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect information about your English learning experience and attitudes. Your participation is very important but entirely voluntary. Please be assured that all information gathered will be treated in strict confidence and used only for survey purposes. This should take about 10 minutes.
If you have any question, please feel free to contact Cecilia by email (address supplied). Thank you for your cooperation

Part I Personal Information
1. Gender
A. Male
B. Female

2. Did you take part in College Entrance Examination?
A. Yes, of course
B. No, I didn't

3. What's your score of English in College Entrance Exam?
(Full mark : _____)

4. Current level of education
A. Undergraduate
B. Postgraduate
C. Doctor

5. Which university do/did you study in?
A. Key university (Project "985", "211")
B. Ordinary university
C. Other

6. What's your major? _____

4.   Have you participated in CET 4?
 A. Yes. Score: _____
 B. No, I haven't.

Part II English learning attitude
8. Learning English is important to me because I would like to travel internationally.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

9. I like English films
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

10. My parents/family believe that I must study English to be an educated person.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

11. Studying English is important to me in order to gain the approval of the society
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

12. Studying English can be important to me because I think I'll need it for further studies.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

13. I always look/looked forward to English classes.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

14. I think learning English is important to learn more about the culture and art of its speakers.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

15. Studying English is important to me because I'm planning to study abroad.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

16. I can imagine myself speaking English fluently in the future with foreign friends.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

17. I have to study English, because, otherwise, I think my parents will be disappointed with me.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

18. Studying English is important to me because without English I won't be able to travel a lot.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

19. Studying English is important to me in order to gain approval of my peers.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

20. Studying English is important to me because other people will respect me more if I have a knowledge of English.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

21. I like TV programs/TV series made in English-speaking countries.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

22. I can imagine myself in the future giving an English speech successfully to the public.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

23. Studying English is important to me because I would feel ashamed if I got bad grades in English.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

24. I really like the actual process of learning English.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

25. I will study English harder when thinking of not becoming a successful user of English in the future.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

26. Studying English is important to me in order to gain the approval of my teachers.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

27. Studying English is important to me because my life will change if I acquire good command of English.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

28. I find learning English really interesting.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

29. I can imagine a situation where I'm using English to fulfil tasks in my job.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

30. Studying English is necessary for me because I don't want to get a poor score or a fail mark in English proficiency tests (IELTS, BEC, CET4/6, TEM4/8, etc.).
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

31. I think time passes faster while learning English.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

32. I have to learn English because I don't want to fail the English course.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

33. I can feel a lot of pressure from my parents when I'm learning English.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

34. I like to travel to English-speaking countries.
 Strongly disagree   ○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5 **Strongly agree**

35. Do you want to participate in a follow-up interview? (You will be rewarded a thank-you voucher after the interview)
A. Yes, why not. E-mail/WeChat: _____
B. No, I don't.

Appendix B. Interview schedule

1.   Which one of the listed categories do you think fits most with your English proficiency?
    A. *Upper Intermediate level and over*: Able to converse about general matters of daily life and topics of one's specialty and grasp the gist of lectures and broadcasts. Able to read high-level materials such as newspapers and write about personal ideas.
    B. *Intermediate level*: Able to converse about general matters of daily life. Able to read general materials related to daily life and write simple passages.
    C. *Lower Intermediate level*: Able to converse about familiar daily topics. Able to read materials about familiar everyday topics and write simple letters.
    D. *Post-Beginner level*: Able to hold a simple conversation such as greeting and introducing someone. Able to read simple materials and write a simple passage in elementary English.
    E. *Beginner level*: Able to give simple greetings using set words and phrases. Able to read simple sentences, grasp the gist of short passages, and to write a simple sentence in basic English.
2.   Are you satisfied with your current English proficiency? If not, why do you want to improve it?
3.   When did you start to learn English? Can you describe your major motives of learning English in each stage of education?
4.   Do you consider English learning as a happy, enjoyable process? Was there something that ever influenced your impression of English?
5.   Did your parents or teachers ever require you to work hard on English?
6.   Do you know cultures of some English-speaking countries? If so, in what ways do you usually get to learn their cultures?
7.   Do you like travelling? How much do you think English matters for your trips?
8.   Can you imagine yourself communicate fluently in English in the future?
9.   How much do you think English matters for your current, future study and work?
10. Will you still learn English if your future job has no relationship with English or foreigners?