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## What Motivates L3 Learners' Investment and/or Divestment in Arabic? Understanding Learning Motivation in terms of "Identity"

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**Abstract.** The study extends our understanding of the relationship between identity and Arabic learning in the Chinese context from a sociolinguistic perspective. Drawing on Darwin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, the study explores the interplay between identity and investment in the context of Chinese learners' motivation to learn Arabic. The sample population comprises 25 adult Arabic learners with Chinese as their first language, English as their second language, and Arabic as their third language. Qualitative data from learners' retrospective narrative accounts and complementary semi-structured interviews were analyzed in terms of identity and investment. The findings show that these Chinese Arabic learners' constitutive orientation towards language learning is highly related to their multifaceted and fluid identities (inherited identities, competitive identities, and imagined identities), which are complex and dynamic and can be negotiated and constructed over time, involving learners' perceptions of affordances in capital resources and their goals of acquiring symbolic and material resources. Therefore, investment/divestment is influenced by the interconnections between identities and perceptions. The study concludes with some methodological and theoretical implications for future research on learning LOTEs (languages other than English) and investment.

**Keywords:** Identity, investment, Chinese learners, Arabic learning motivation

### [ch] 影响阿拉伯语三语学习者投资/放弃投资的动机研究：身份认同的视角

**摘要.** 本研究从社会语言学视阈扩展了我们对中国语境下身份认同与阿拉伯语学习之间关系的理解。基于投资模型 (Darvin & Norton, 2015), 本研究探索了中国学习者学习阿拉伯语的动机中身份认同与投资之间的相互作用。受试样本包括25位成年阿拉伯语学习者, 他们的母语是汉语, 第二语言是英语, 第三语言是阿拉伯语。质性实验数据是学习者的回溯性叙述和作为补充的半结构化访谈, 并依照身份认同与投资加以分析。研究表明, 这些中国阿拉伯语学习者对语言学习的本性取向与他们多层面的流动性身份认同(继承身份, 竞争性身份和想象身份)高度相关, 这些身份是复杂而动态的, 可以随着时间的推移进行协商和构建, 涉及学习者对资本中给养的理解以及他们获取符号和物质资源的目标。因此, 投资/撤资受身份认同与观念间相互联系的影响。本研究总结了对未来LOTE(英语以外的其他语言)和投资相关研究的方法论和理论启示。

**关键词:** 身份认同, 投资, 中国学习者, 阿拉伯语学习动机

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## 1. Introduction

Recently there has been a significant research focus on the underlying factors that motivate language learners and drive their efforts in relation to language learning (e.g., Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015; Darwin & Norton, 2018). In studies ranging from the psycholinguistic to the sociolinguistic (c.f., Gao & Lv, 2018), there has been a transdisciplinary turn in applied linguistic research. Identity has become a major focus in terms of language teaching and learning, as well as in the broader field of applied linguistics (Norton & Toohey, 2011), and a poststructuralist approach to

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identity is often enlisted to explore the interrelation between identity construction and motivated second language (L2) learning (Block, 2007).

Most studies on language learning motivation through an identity lens have concentrated on the acquisition of global English (c.f., Gearing & Roger, 2018), involving migrant English learners' investment in English along with their changing identities in local neighborhoods, which are usually driven by multiple desires for the membership of central English-speaking communities (e.g., Norton, 2000; Darwin & Norton, 2014). Other studies have looked at English learning in English-mediated classrooms within the Chinese context, promoted by potential personal capital attached to English learning (e.g., Arkoudis & Davison, 2008). However, there are few studies examining whether the sociolinguistic perspective, i.e., identity, can also be applied to the learning of languages other than English (LOTEs) that do not have a global status, such as Arabic (e.g., Temples, 2013), Russian (e.g., Yakushkina & Olson, 2017), Korean (e.g., Gearing & Roger, 2018), or Japanese (e.g., Teo, Hoi, Gao, & Lv, 2019). Preliminary studies have noted that participants' identity constructions reveal conflict or negotiation in individuals' identities as "a site of struggle" (Norton & Toohey, 2001: 414) within certain contexts, usually involving the formation of a dual identity to accommodate both ethnic groups and dominant language communities, and leading to investment in and/or divestment of particular foreign languages.

The present study focuses on learners of Arabic as a third language in the Chinese context, in an attempt to explore the complex identity construction of foreign language learners across time and space, and to investigate their motivated/demotivated Arabic learning with regard to relationships established over time between persons, activities, and the world (Wenger, 1998), which may to some degree enrich the scope of LOTE research from the sociolinguistic perspective.

## 2. Theorizing Identity in L2 Learning

### 2.1. Investment, Identity, and Motivation to L2 Learning

It is argued that investment and identity "signal the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it" (Norton & Toohey, 2011: 420). In summarizing the concept of a language learner's identity and his/her notion of investment in a target language, this term was initially used by Bonny Norton Peirce in 1995, arguing that it is "investment rather than motivation" (Norton, 1995: 9) that finally encourages one's target language learning, and that a language learner's social identity should also be considered in L2 learning. Norton constructs this idea with reference to the position that an "educational system reproduces the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes" (Bourdieu, 1977: 493).

To complement the theoretical construct of investment and identity, Norton attempts to build a connection between a language learner's commitment to a target language and his/her identity formation. She argues that a learner who invests in learning will be expecting to receive a return on his/her investment (Norton, 2013) in the form of increasing the cultural and/or symbolic capital that he/she will attain in the future (Norton, 2014), and thus defines identity as "how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013: 45). The construct of investment is inspired by Bourdieu's distinction theory, which describes the lifelong evolution of capital as "increasing, decreasing, or stationary volume of each sort of capital (amenable to the same distinction) and therefore the composition of his/her capital" (Bourdieu, 1984: 123). Moreover, Norton further develops her notion of investment and proposes a model of investment that integrates identity, ideology, and capital, viewing the language learner as "a social being with a complex identity that changes across time and space and is reproduced in social interaction" (Darwin & Norton, 2015: 37). Therefore, investment by an L2 learner is a process of negotiation and reproduction of his/her identity, which will in turn affect the learner's investment.

### 2.2. Identity in a Spatial-temporal Continuum

Theorization about L2 identity involves several subtypes in terms of different contexts or research topics, and it can be situated along a spatial-temporal continuum. Concerning learners' past experience, heritage language learning has connections with a valued ethnic identity (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003), and heritage identity is claimed to have "deep emotional and affective links to social and historical elements of one's ethnic and linguistic heritage" (Berardi-Wiltshire, 2012: 32). Meanwhile, religious identity interprets the relationship between an individual learner and certain religions as well as religious communities (Norton, 2019).

Referring to a learner's current status, learners will usually engage in social competition with others to make themselves positively distinctive (Abrams, 2001), so it is important to construct a clear identity based on cultural distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) and competitive identity. Huigen and Meijering (2005: 20) describe this process as "McDonaldization", and they warn that such conformity leads to the loss of any competitive identity.

In terms of the future, imagined identity is derived from imagined community, which was originally proposed as a term by Anderson (1991), applied to second language acquisition (SLA) by Norton (2001), and developed by Kanno and Norton (2003) as well as Pavlenko and Norton (2007). It is acknowledged that a language learner's desires for the future are parts of his/her identity, and the target language community can be a desired community of imagination that "offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future" (Norton & Toohey, 2011: 415). Therefore, a learner's investment in a target language should be discussed within this context.

If we consider that the conceptualization of identity within an imagined community is forward-looking, an alternative backward-looking identity—for example, identity inherited from one's historical background of community or family—should also be taken into account to explain learners' investment processes. This study attempts to situate identity along a spatial-temporal continuum instead of in a static state, ranging from the past to the future to give a new interpretation of language learning identity from the investment perspective.

### 3. Conceptualizing Arabic Learning in Mainland China

Within the linguistic landscape in China, the Belt and Road (B&R) Initiative proposed by the Chinese government, which aims to promote communication and collaboration among 123 countries and regions (Han, Gao, & Xia, 2019), has promoted the plan of "Developing Educational Cooperation along the B&R" (MOE, 2016). Consequently, recent years have seen reform and enhancement of LOTE learning, and an emergent multilingual trend within the domain of tertiary education in China. Therefore, it is now possible to carry out linguistic research related to teaching and learning LOTES in mainland China—for example, Arabic learning by Chinese learners.

Regarding the Arabic language, although it is one of the six official languages of the United Nations and the religious language of all Muslims, there has been limited research related to the learning and teaching of Arabic as a foreign language. Existing studies include diglossia of Arabic in terms of various categorizations (e.g., Heath, 2002, 2; Harrat et al., 2017), risks in relation to its different varieties in Arabic-speaking regions (e.g., Liao, 2018), the acquisition of Arabic grammatical rules for foreign language learners (e.g., Al-Shaer, 2014; Azaz, 2016; 2017), as well as sociolinguistic studies concerning identity within Arabic-speaking regions, for example local language formation and individuals' identities in the Arabian Gulf (Holes, 2011). There is no research focusing on language learners' motivation and investment in learning Arabic according to their identity constructions.

Within the Chinese context, Arabic is not an official language, and Arabic communities are not in a dominant position. Arabic learners' motivation to learn and their patterns of identity during investment in a seemingly "peripheral" language, compared with global English, the official language (Chinese), or other more commonly taught European languages (e.g., German, French, Spanish), are certainly worthy of further exploration with reference to the notion of identity as "a site of struggle" (Norton & Toohey, 2001: 414) consistent with the peripheral-central order. Hence this study is expected to shed new light on learners' identity construction in terms of their investment in learning a LOTE, specifically Arabic.

## 4. The Study

This study aims to broaden the field of research on language learning identity beyond the global English context, probing into a LOTE that is a dominant language across the world and is closely related to a specific religion and culture. The study addresses the following research question:

How Arabic learners' identity construction a continuum related to their investment/divestment in Arabic learning?

### 4.1. Research Context and Participants

The study was carried out in one of the top comprehensive universities (anonymized as Guanghua University) located in Shanghai, a cosmopolitan city in Southeastern China. According to the language policies proposed by the government and the university, Arabic has been included in the curriculum as a public optional course since the Fall Semester of 2018.

The study involved 25 adult Arabic learners who are or were members of Arabic classes in Guanghua University and who were willing to share their learning experiences. They were divided into three groups: 17 undergraduate learners, 4 postgraduate learners, and 4 non-degree learners. The former two groups of participants were full-time students at Guanghua University, while the last group of participants were non-degree learners at Guanghua University. Table 1 illustrates detailed information about these participants.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

No.	Major/Profession	Group	Gender	Nationality	Years of Arabic Learning*
U1	Chinese	Undergraduate	Male	Han	1
U2	Chinese	Undergraduate	Female	Han	1
U3	Russian	Undergraduate	Female	Han	1
U4	History	Undergraduate	Female	Mongolian	1
U5	Philosophy	Undergraduate	Male	Hui	1
U6	International Politics	Undergraduate	Male	Han	0.5
U7	International Politics	Undergraduate	Male	Hui	0.5
U8	International Politics	Undergraduate	Female	Han	1.5
U9	Nursing	Undergraduate	Female	Han	1
U10	Journalism	Undergraduate	Female	Hui	0.5
U11	Physics	Undergraduate	Male	Hui	1
U12	French	Undergraduate	Male	Han	1
U13	Physics	Undergraduate	Male	Han	0.5
U14	Physics	Undergraduate	Female	Hui	0.5
U15	Physics	Undergraduate	Male	Han	0.5
U16	International Politics	Undergraduate	Male	Han	0.5
U17	Pharmacy	Undergraduate	Female	Han	0.5
P1	History	Postgraduate	Female	Han	0.5
P2	Chinese	Postgraduate	Male	Han	0.5
P3	Anthropology	Postgraduate	Female	Hui	1.5
P4	Linguistics	Postgraduate	Male	Han	0.5
N1	Entrepreneur	Non-degree learner	Male	Han	1
N2	Entrepreneur	Non-degree learner	Male	Han	31
N3	Assistant Professor	Non-degree learner	Male	Han	0.5
N4	Lecturer	Non-degree learner	Male	Han	1.5

\* Since the participants enrolled in Arabic courses at Guanghua University.

## 4.2. Data Collection

The 25 participants were first asked to submit a retrospective narrative (see Appendix 1) on their Arabic learning, mainly involving their motivation to learn Arabic and their opinions about the language and related culture and religion. The retrospective narratives were written in Chinese and collected online by the first author, with each piece around 1000–1500 Chinese characters in length, on average.

To complement the retrospective data, semi-structured interviews (for outline, see Appendix 2) were carried out with all the participants, exploring more about their educational backgrounds, language proficiencies, and their personal values in relation to certain aspects selected on the basis of their retrospective narratives. Each interview was a face-to-face conversation between one of the authors and a single participant, conducted in Chinese and lasting for around 15 minutes. The whole process was audio-recorded and observational field notes were taken, including all the details of questions and responses during the interviews.

## 4.3. Data Analysis

All the qualitative data were analyzed according to the construct of investment, with the initial retrospective narratives as the main resource and the interviews as important supplementary data using both deductive and inductive approaches (Merriam, 2009). The data were coded in QDA Miner Lite, as shown in Table 2. First, we randomly selected six retrospective narratives together with the later associated interviews (two from each group) and employed QDA Miner Lite

– using words and phrases from the participants’ own language – to investigate their voices by capturing their special experiences of Arabic language investment. Then we referred to the key constructs in Darwin and Norton’s (2015) model of investment, such as the students’ understanding of the values of language learning (“ideologies”), their social identities, religious identities, and cosmopolitan identities (“identities”), their input of time and endeavor, and their expected gains (“capital”). This process generated eleven subcategories (see Table 2). Then, axial coding was conducted to probe into the interactions between these eleven subcategories concepts, resulting in three typical types of *identities* of Arabic learners, namely heritage identity (two subcategories), competitive identity (three subcategories), and imagined identity (two subcategories). During the final stage the three authors discussed the interrelationship between each categorization and further abstracted the categories into three themes: heritage identity of the past, competitive identity of the present, imagined identity of the future, and investment located at the intersection.

**Table 2.** Coding Themes based on the Investment Model.

Coding	Identity	Capital	Ideology	Macro factors
<b>Initial coding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Competitive identity</li> <li>Cosmopolitan identity</li> <li>Social identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Affordance</li> <li>Perceived benefits of linguistic value</li> <li>Perceived benefits of instrumental value</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educational self</li> <li>Imagined community</li> <li>Language ideology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Politics</li> <li>University system</li> </ul>
<b>Axial coding</b>	<p><b>Heritage identity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ethnic identity</li> <li>Religious identity</li> </ul>	<p><b>Competitive identity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unique selling proposition in the global market</li> <li>Cultural competence</li> <li>Personal Pursuits</li> </ul>	<p><b>Imagined identity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cosmopolitan members</li> <li>Imagined attachment</li> </ul>	

## 5. Findings

The findings from the present study demonstrate that the Arabic learners at Guanghua University constructed multiple identities derived from their past, present, and future. This section examines the relationship between the identities and language investment of the participants, linking the discussion to their changing expectations of learning Arabic, their shifting identities, and their investment/divestment in this language.

### 5.1. Heritage Identities and Language Investment

Heritage identities are reflections of one’s deep beliefs, attitudes, and mindsets (Macintyre, Baker, & Sparling, 2017), almost fixed and natural, intrinsically linked to individuals’ social and cultural views of how they see themselves and others. According to Norton and Gao (2008: 110), “an investment in the target language is in fact an investment in the learner’s own identity”. The choice to learn Arabic made by the six ethnic Hui students in this study highlights their desire to reconstruct their inherited ethnic identity and religious identity, further explained in the following.

#### *Ethnic Identity*

P3 was born in an ethnic Hui family. The Hui are usually seen as the descendants of Arabian businessmen who settled or inter-married with local Chinese around the tenth century under the unification of Islam (Gladney, 2003). Although her family did not practice Islam, she distinguished herself as ethnic Hui culturally because of an attachment to a few cultural traditions from her childhood. She admitted to feeling close to Arabic and its culture because of Arabic learning.

#### Excerpt 1

P3: I was born in an ethnic Hui family in Shanghai, but lived with Chinese Han afterwards. However, some elements in daily life still remind me of my own identity, such as my grandmother’s habit of eating Halal food and the special holidays I spent in my childhood. Therefore, the original intention of learning Arabic is to trace back my own identity through language. And I looked up my genealogy, found that some of my ancestors were truly Arabs, which aroused my greatest interest to see what it was like. I believe that identity is my ultimate goal in learning Arabic. (interview)

As noted above, P3 choice to learn Arabic at university is part of her attempt to reconstruct her ethnic identity. The here-and-now learning experience helps her to recall childhood memories, such as “eating Halal food” and

“the special holidays I spent in my childhood” (P3). We can also see that this linguistic practice is complementary, since she also used other means to trace her roots: “I looked up my genealogy, found that some of my ancestors were truly Arabs.” This also suggests that language learners’ identity is not static, but fluid and in a continuum.

### ***Religious Identity***

Religious identity is another important element that influences a learner’s selection of Arabic. Religion binds people into a sacred community (Turner, 1991), and therefore it has the power to cause individuals to exert their greatest efforts to be in or close to this sacred community. Four Muslim students (U5, U7, U11, and U14) all emphasized at the beginning of their retrospective narratives that the Muslim identity inherited from their parents contributed to their choice to invest in Arabic learning, because Chinese Muslims hold the same belief as all other Muslims worldwide that “Arabic is the language of God and the text of the Qur’an is the word of God” (U7). Productive competence in Arabic is believed to be necessary for a Muslim to perform his/her religious obligations and express proper religious feelings.

#### **Excerpt 2**

U5: Qur’an is a religious text related by being a compilation of religious traditions and a discussion of beliefs, mythologies, ritual practices. It is something sacred and mysterious related to my faith, which always urges me to learn more about this language. (retrospective narrative)

#### **Excerpt 3**

U11: Speaking Arabic makes me feel divine, because when I read Arabic aloud it is just like talking to those highly respected Islamic Imams face to face. (retrospective narrative)

These Muslim students believe that the Islamic religion is a force that significantly interacts with other cultural institutions in their daily life, such as Arabic, the language of the Qur’an (the Islamic holy book). Hence, as far as they are concerned, their investment and engagement in Arabic learning may be regarded as a particularly desirable form of investment in their religious identity, aiming to fulfill their religious engagement.

In this study, all of the 6 students (U5, U7, U10, U11, U14, P3) who had inherited a common Hui identity, membership of an ethnic Hui family, or an Islamic religious background family showed high enthusiasm in learning the Arabic language in one form or another.

## **5.2. Competitive Identities and Language Investment**

Competitive identity (Huigen & Meijering, 2005: 20) is otherwise known as “McDonaldization”, and comes with the warning that conformity leads to the loss of any competitive identity. The modern world is effectively a single market, and every stakeholder must compete with others for their share and “unique selling proposition”. It is clearly true that learning a unique foreign language will provide learners with a framework to develop (inter)cultural competence while offering various opportunities to pursue personal goals.

### ***Unique Selling Proposition in the Global Market***

Through the process of learning Arabic language, students see themselves as developing unique selling propositions in the global market, because they regard Arabic as a type of rare linguistic capital (Park & Wee, 2009) or commodity with value related to cultural affordances, and they hope that these cultural affordances can be used to gain a wider range of symbolic and material goods. In the narrative accounts, most participants admitted that Arabic has great instrumental and communicative value, because it is “one of the six official languages in the United Nations” (U8) and is “widely used in Middle East region” (U3). Therefore, mastering Arabic will offer them “greater opportunities” (U13), which can be perceived as distinctive advantages and cultural signifiers as they seek to identify themselves and indicate their differences from others.

#### **Excerpt 4**

U6: I am a student of international politics. Since it is more interesting to focus on Middle Eastern studies and fewer people speak Middle Eastern languages, I chose Arabic. (interview)

Similarly, 9 other participants admitted that the reason why they chose to learn Arabic was that quite a few people could understand it, although another participant (U17) expressed her resolution to take the bull by the horns, saying “Is Arabic really difficult? I want to try”. We may conclude that there is a strong tendency among Arabic learners to seek competitive advantage and obtain a unique selling proposition in the global market by becoming actively involved in something that is widely assumed to be challenge.

## ***Cultural Competence***

Today, cultural competence is a competitive advantage because it can be the key to success or failure in the global market. According to Bourdieu (2001), cultural competence derives scarcity value and yields profits of distinction for its owner. Also, cultural capital is particularly defined by the ability to understand and use a particular language (Bourdieu, 1977). Therefore, for the Arabic learners at Guanghai University, gaining this kind of language capital through learning Arabic as part of the curriculum enables them to construct their competitive identities.

Some Arabic learners invested in Arabic learning are in the hope that they would be able to use their Arabic language skills to communicate first-hand professional information, in order to develop their identities as successful academic researchers:

### **Excerpt 5**

N3: I am an assistant researcher in Middle Eastern studies, Arabic is an important original source for my research, so I think, even if I can only pick out a few notes in Arabic, it will be very helpful for my current research. (interview)

As noted above, N3, an assistant researcher in Middle Eastern studies, emphasized the language proficiency requirement because “Arabic is an important original source for my research”, and thought that even understanding a little Arabic “will be very helpful for my current research”. Likewise, P1 and U16 also believed that Arabic proficiency could help them to understand “related professional books” on “religious studies” and “Middle Eastern studies”.

However, it is also important to mention that N3 decided to stop learning Arabic and divested from Arabic learning 6 months later, and even regretted having devoted such great efforts to his Arabic learning. He explained his change of mind in his retrospective narrative:

### **Excerpt 6**

N3: I am getting older and it takes much longer to learn new things, and it is really difficult for me to remember Arabic words and grammar, so I can't use this language to collect information about the Arab world on the internet, let alone understand news and papers written in Arabic. Therefore, I dropped it later, not wasting my time anymore on repetition of the basic things in Arabic, but focused on my research, such as reading more academic papers written in English instead. It is much more helpful. (interview)

N3 stated that his initial belief about learning Arabic was that a little knowledge gained through reading Arabic texts would contribute a lot to his Middle East research, but he soon recognized the status quo (Darvin & Norton, 2015) in terms of the impossibility of promoting his knowledge of the Middle East (i.e., his cultural competence) by learning Arabic, because it would take a lot of time (i.e., investment). Instead, more affordable investment in learning English “is much more helpful for knowledge acquisition” (i.e., the perceived benefits of the investment), since he performs better in English compared to Arabic.

## ***Personal Pursuits***

Man is an investment in himself (Indaimo, 2015: 20), so it is one's own agentic actions to evaluate his/her own affordances and makes the decision to invest in social competition. This moral law of Man also extends to competing for personal pursuits, that is, to preserving his competitive identity during the various competitions involved in civil society. The students at Guanghai University also invested in Arabic language learning for their personal pursuits:

### **Excerpt 7**

P4: After learning Arabic, I am capable of searching online resources for Arabic musicians from Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Egypt and other places, so as to know their lives. For example, I followed Abu Rami, an oud teacher who lives in Riyadh; one day I recognized the Arabic letters Abu Rami (his name) engraved on one of his ouds. This made me excited—how would I understand the letters on his oud, if I had not studied Arabic. (interview)

P4 wanted to “search online resources for Arabic musicians” to support his hobby of listening to Arabic music. Several other participants also presented various personal interests that they were able to pursue through learning Arabic, including understanding Islam (U7), doing business (N1), and even chasing an Arabic girl (N4).

Hence, these Arabic learners at Guanghai University reasoned that the process of communication and reading in Arabic and their special capacity of using Arabic language is a function of their knowledge of the “realistic” Arab world. That is, they are able to name and explain “invisible” things; according to Bourdieu (1984), this distinction in taste between the “realistic” and the “unrealistic”, the “visible” and the “invisible”, achieved through their competence in Arabic, may be seen as a badge of their competitive identity and thus allow them to convert symbolic profits accruing from their Arabic language distinction into a wider range of cultural capital, such as increasing the value of their religious knowledge, their professional education and skills, and various cultural tastes such as Arabic music.

### 5.3. Imagined Identities and Language Investment

Imagined identity is the ideal L2 self that learners assume they will become in an imagined community (Norton & Toohey, 2011), and this imagined community may not only offer possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future, but may also be, to some extent, a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships. (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton 2007). Norton (2013) suggests that it is in the realm of imagined identities that learners are able to express their desires and exert their own agency to invest in selected areas for the sake of achieving desire-based ends. The findings from the present study also show the power of imagination for these Arabic learners as they aspire to become members of a cosmopolitan community or feel a sense of attachment to a particular imagined community.

#### *Cosmopolitan Members*

Drawing upon the idea that an “imagined community invite[s] an imagined identity” (Norton, 2001), this study found that their imagined membership of a cosmopolitan community allowed 23 out of the 25 participants to identify themselves as global citizens, or at least recognize that they were willing to become global citizens. When they were asked about what multiculturalism meant to them in the follow-up interviews, most participants responded with terms such as “respect” (U2), “accept” (U10, U13, P4), “embrace” (U1, U4), and “integrate” (U5, U17) in relation to the co-existence of diverse cultures. In addition, some participants described the world as a “global village” (U2), and hoped to “promote in-depth dialogue between various civilizations and cultures” (U16).

#### Excerpt 8

U1: The purpose of (learning multiple languages) is to promote intercultural communication as well as highlight the importance of cultural tolerance as a value... While referring to Arabic learning, although it may not bring about direct benefits, it will help to create the right conditions for human development, and I always wish to embrace multiculturalism which is based on building a community of shared future for mankind. (interview)

As illustrated above, U1 hoped to build a community that valued the importance of “cultural tolerance”, and this imagined future encouraged him to invest in Arabic so as to “promote intercultural communication” and thus “build a community of shared future for mankind”, although “it may not bring about direct benefits” for him right now.

#### *Imagined Attachment*

Other participants imagined themselves to have various attachments to certain communities, and even the community of human beings which can transcend time and space (Norton, 2001: 164), such as an anticipated future attachment to specific minority communities (the Muslim community, socially vulnerable groups, academic groups), as well as attachments with all the individuals living in the imagined communities. From this, they anticipated their ability to become fluent in Arabic and be able to communicate freely and effectively with Arabic-speaking participants in an imagined inter-cultural global community. Some of them may have imagined themselves integrating into a particular community so as to fight against poverty and inequality for Arabs.

#### Excerpt 9

U10: When I was young, I always dream of “equality and freedom”. Hence, I see Muslims as my pals, since their ancestors have made great contributions to human civilization just like ours, so why should they suffer from the bitterness of war and bullying of prejudice? Then I began to think, although I may not be able to help them out, I can at least try to let others understand their authentic and splendid culture and civilization; in this sense, maybe I can’t be a world peace warrior, but I can be a fighter upholding the principle of the equality of all cultures. All in all, the premise of that, I should master their language, Arabic. (retrospective narrative)

The above extract illustrates that despite being a full-time college student, U10 imagined herself as attached to “Muslim pals”, held a sympathetic attitude towards them and wished to “be a fighter upholding the principle of the equality of all cultures”, a desire that would motivate her to learn Arabic. Likewise, U5 showed similar empathy for “vulnerable families living in Africa and some of the Middle East countries”, places which are often struggling with war, conflict, poverty, and hunger, and which have long endured by religious stigma and cultural mistrust. All of these aspects made these Arabic learners, U10 and U5, more empathetic with Muslim people’s problem and pain, and they sincerely wished to “help them out”, “listen to their voices”, and “speak for them”. Thus, guided by their imagined attachment and the goal of being able to care for vulnerable Muslims, these Arabic learners positioned themselves in a sense of place with others (Bourdieu, 1987: 5)—that is, with other vulnerable Muslims—together with the affinities

of habitus experienced in the form of personal sympathy and love for vulnerable Muslims, thereby providing guidance for their investment in learning Arabic, the Muslim language.

Furthermore, the above-mentioned findings also suggest that, for these Arabic learners, identity is a continuum beginning with their birth in terms of their family background, and it extends beyond the language classroom. Imagined community is as much a reconstruction of the past as it is an imaginative construction of the future. For U5, only other members of his imagined community (members of charitable associations who “take responsibilities for helping all those socially vulnerable groups around the world”) could validate his inherited identity as a Hui Muslim.

It is also worth mentioning that learners may decide to quit learning Arabic when their imagined attachment with the Arabic-speaking communities changes. U6, a senior undergraduate student of International Politics, exercised his agency “to fight academic battles” (Chang, 2011) by registering in Arabic language classes at all levels with the hope of “speeding up” his language learning process at first, since his original imagined attachment was to become a doctoral student in a Middle Eastern studies program. Two months later, however, he withdrew from all the Arabic courses and stopped Arabic learning, because his imagined attachment to an academic group changed to enrolling in a Master’s in Middle Eastern Studies, which had “no special requirement for Arabic proficiency”.

#### Excerpt 10

U6: I chose to enter a Master’s program in Middle Eastern studies, because comparing between becoming a scholar with doctoral degree and a civil servant with a Master’s degree, I preferred to be the latter, so I declined the doctoral program and chose to further my study as a Master. Also, it is much easier to get a Master’s degree than a doctoral degree in this field; obviously, there is no essential need to learn Arabic for a Master’s degree. (interview)

Thus, shifts in this participant’s educational program, from a doctoral degree to a Master’s degree, have led to new relations in his imagined future and language proficiency needs, reshaping his language beliefs about the necessity of Arabic learning and leading to his final divestment from the Arabic learning process.

## 6. Discussion

At the outset of the study we wished to understand the participants motivated learning process in relation to the Arabic language from an investment perspective, and the participants retrospective narratives and interviews enabled us to rely on their multiple identities—based on attributes such as ethnicity, religion, profession, and organizational membership—to understand their investment/divestment. The results confirm the multifaceted identities of language learners, demonstrating that Arabic learners’ identity mechanisms can be seen as a continuum including their heritage identity in the past, their competitive identity in the present, and their imagined identity in the future (see Figure 1).

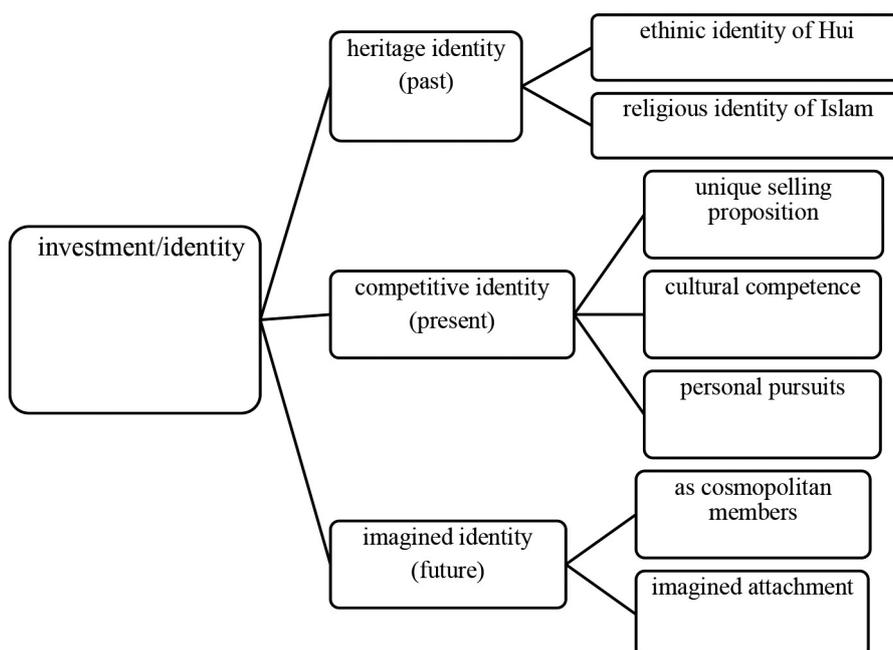


Figure 1. Multiple Identities of Arabic Learners in a Continuum.

These multiple identities help us to appreciate these Arabic learners' investment within "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013: 45). Thus, the findings emerging from the analysis highlight three significant issues with regard to our efforts to understand the question in this study.

First, the study contributes to the SLA field by examining the language investment of Arabic LOTE students in China. Unlike previous research which has mainly focused on EFL learners' identity and language investment (Norton, 2000; Arkoudis & Davison, 2008; Darvin & Norton 2014), this study provides empirical evidence collected from 25 voluntary Arabic LOTE learners at Guanghai University, bridging the research gap in relation to investment in LOTES, and Arabic in particular. In line with the promotion of multilingual and multicultural education across the world, Arabic, as a dominant language along the B&R, has been listed in several Chinese university curricula and has been available for students. Students at Guanghai University made this investment and entered Arabic language classrooms equipped with affordances of different capital such as free language course access, their pre-existing linguistic skills, etc., hoping to transform this capital into something valuable in the near future (Darvin & Norton, 2015: 45) in the belief that plenty of opportunities would result from the government's Belt and Road initiative. This study traces the Arabic LOTE learners' multiple identities by investigating their personal stories in the Chinese context, illustrating how identity categories like ethnicity, religion, competitiveness and imagination interact with their language learning investment. Thus, this study represents an initial inquiry into the much-needed exploration of LOTE investment by providing evidence of Arabic LOTE investment, an issue that has seldom been discussed before.

A second issue relates to the divestment of language learners that occurs along with investment, and which results from incompatible identities. Unlike previous studies which primarily noted learners' investment in language practice (Norton, 1995; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Darvin & Norton, 2015), the findings of this study reveal that divestment in the target language, like investment, is a discursive and dynamic process (Norton 2013, Darvin and Norton 2015) that can be studied as a process of divestment in a learner's own identity, which is constantly changing across time and space (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000). Our findings substantiate this position by offering two cases of Arabic learners at Guanghai University. At first, their imagined identity of being fluent in Arabic assumed a strong and supportive role as an affordance in their Arabic LOTE investment and learning, but after a few months it came to represent conflicting sets of norms and values, with conflict between the imagined identity of expected language proficiency and the affordance of capital (i.e., time and monetary resources). These competing demands related to individual commitments to language practice and the perceived benefits of investment caused the learners to end up in a position of divestment with regard to maintaining their capital, harmonizing with their identity and opening themselves to self-development.

As a result, we may conclude that if learners invest in a language because of a short-term desire to rapidly acquire a wider range of material/economic resources, such as fluent reading and speaking skills (i.e., property), or to increase their workplace competitiveness (i.e., wealth) over a short period of time, they may easily withdraw from investment because the difficulties of mastering Arabic cause reflection on the balance between affordance (i.e., a lot of time) and perceived benefits of material/economic capital (Darvin & Norton, 2015). In contrast, if learners invest in a language because of a desire to acquire a wider range of symbolic resources, such as cultural capital in terms of a better appreciation of Arabic culture or social capital related to taking care of vulnerable people, they may continue to invest.

The third issue emerging from the data analysis is that Arabic LOTE learners are driven to pursue social justice and equality related to their language ideology. Based on the notion that language ideology relates to the values and meanings attached to the language itself (Jaffe, 2009), previous research found that learners' ideologies about English acquisition were often aligned with hierarchical linguistic values regarding language use for instrumental purposes, such as being able to access information from different sources on the internet; continuing education abroad, getting better jobs, etc. (Norton, 2019). This study suggests that language learners' aspirations may also entail an imagined identity in the global community, with learners envisioning themselves as brothers or sisters of people who are affected by poverty, social inequality, and cultural discrimination. Thus, imagined multilingual and multicultural identities of being global citizens, simultaneously shaped by their Arabic language ideology and the the pursuit of social equality, affect learners' choices in relation to Arabic LOTE investment.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, this study aimed to address the question of understanding Chinese Arabic LOTE students' motivated learning processes from the perspective of investment/divestment and identity construction. The results contribute to the literature by exploring the relationship between language learners' identity and their investment/divestment in language learning among Arabic LOTE learners in the context of one of the top comprehensive universities in China, and revealing the resulting interactions between identity, ideology and capital. Also, the findings verify that language learners' identities are multiple, fluid, and should be perceived as operating along a continuum; investment in a target language is in fact investment in the learner's own identity, as established by Norton (2001; 2008; 2015; 2019), and the same is true for a divestment practice. In addition, we argue that Arabic LOTE learners' pursuit of social

equality and imagination of a world characterized by cultural diversity and tolerance encourage them to construct their imagined cosmopolitan identity and influence their long-term investment in language learning, while those who are pursuing purely instrumental and communicative goals may be more inclined to divest. This insight may help to add an alternative dimension to the already-vibrant area of identity research, and offer enlightenment to the diverse identity practices of other LOTE learners.

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## **Appendix 1. Prompts for Retrospective Narrative**

1. Why do you want to learn Arabic?
2. What was your understanding of the Arabic language and Arabic world before learning Arabic? What influences do you think Arabic has exerted on you?
3. What is your understanding of the Arabic language and Arabic world during Arabic learning (monthly or quarterly)?
4. How has Arabic changed you?

## **Appendix 2. Interview Outline**

1. How many languages have you learnt before?
2. What is your self-assessment of the languages learnt?
3. Why did you choose Arabic?
4. Was there any goal or concern when you chose Arabic?
5. What proficiency in Arabic do you want to attain?
6. How much time do you invest in Arabic learning weekly?
7. Do you think of yourself as multilingual? Or do you want to be multilingual?
8. Do you think of yourself as a global citizen?
9. What is your perception of multilingualism?
10. Do you think you are self-motivated or driven by external factors to learn Arabic?
11. Do credits or GPA matter in your choice of Arabic lessons?
12. Does Arabic contribute to your majors or your future career?
13. Is there any peer pressure on you in terms of the choice to learn Arabic?
14. What do you think are the relationship between Arabic and acquired languages, specifically English and Chinese?
15. Do you think you are “cool” or special among your peers because of learning Arabic?
16. What is (are) the frequently used language(s) in your daily life?