

The Impact of Admission Factors on the Identity Construction and Learning Practices of Chinese LOTE-as-L2 High School Students

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Abstract: An increasing number of Chinese high school students are choosing to study a language other than English as their first foreign language and opting to use these languages for the higher education entrance exams. However, in Chinese culture, the national college entrance examination (known as Gaokao) is not only a test of academic ability. It also significantly influences the learner's future social mobility and career development. This study employs Darwin and Norton's investment model to explore how the exam culture controls the identity construction and learning practices of high school language-other-than-English learners (Darvin & Norton, 2015). This study focuses on 14 high school students from a foreign language school in Shanghai who have chosen Japanese, German, Spanish, and French as their first foreign language. Over the course of a year, using a series of qualitative research methods, this study found that, under the influence of exam culture, learners invest in non-English languages intending to achieve upward social mobility and construct elite identities. This is done by competing for languages with "better resources," achieving better Gaokao scores through different assessment standards among languages, applying to foreign universities to mitigate the risk of Gaokao, and seeking admission to elite foreign universities and job opportunities abroad through international mobility.

Keywords: Investment, Examination Culture, High School LOTE Learners, Identity, Social Mobility

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Impact of Admission Factors on the Identity Construction and Learning Practices of Chinese Lote-As-L2 High School Students

In recent years, China has experienced a rapid expansion of language-other-than-English (LOTE) programs at the secondary school level. Taking Shanghai as an example, in 2003, only a few secondary schools offered multilingual courses; by the end of 2019, 25 high schools had offered more than one foreign language course, and an increasing number of middle school students had become LOTE learners. In response to this phenomenon, academic research has explored the value and needs, progress and challenges, curriculum construction, and student and teacher development from the perspective of high school LOTE offerings.

Furthermore, it has examined LOTE learners' learning motivation and the interrelationship of this motivation from a psychological perspective (Xie & Dong, 2022; Zhang, 2018). However, little research has focused on the identity construction of secondary school LOTE learners under the influence of China's exam culture. For middle school students, learning an LOTE is considered a difficult decision because most Chinese students' first foreign language in the early stages of education is English. Abandoning English in secondary school in favor of an LOTE requires more time and effort. Moreover, influenced by the exam culture, Chinese students view higher education as a key factor determining their future development and social class mobility, a social ideology that is different from other research contexts, where learners prioritize personal growth over a single examination result. Therefore, exploring how factors related to higher education admission influence Chinese learners' LOTE investment decisions is valuable.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explores the exam culture in Chinese society, the cultural connotations behind it, its impact on social mobility, and its significance for acquiring elite status. Understanding the influence that China's college entrance exam (hereinafter referred to as Gaokao) has on Chinese social ideology is crucial to comprehending the sociocultural motivations behind middle school students' capital accumulation and identity construction around the Gaokao. From both a cross-national comparative perspective and a historical research viewpoint, the Chinese Gaokao exhibits its scientific system and cultural uniqueness. Established in 1952, the Chinese Gaokao system, like other standardized tests around the world (such as the Scholastic Assessment Test in the United States and the Baccalauréat in France), is a scientific method of aptitude testing with an irreplaceable role. However, China's practice of selecting talent through examinations can be traced back to the imperial examination system of the Sui Dynasty (581-618AD). This system functioned as a fundamental institution, integrating cultural, educational, political, and social aspects (Liu, 2002). Unlike the lifelong learning concept in the West, the Chinese cultural perspective holds that success in exams can elevate social status and fulfill personal value, representing a commitment to social responsibility and family honor. In addition to its cultural impact, the Gaokao also functions as a mechanism for social mobility, promoting the movement of talent across

regions and facilitating social class mobility. Historically, many children from non-elite families have become genuine social elites through exams and education. The Chinese-American historian Ho (Ho, 1962) found that the social origins of Jinshi (successful candidates in the highest imperial exams) during the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty were diverse, with a significant proportion of them, about 40%, coming from humble backgrounds without any official status in the previous three generations. Research led by Liang et al. (Liang et al., 2012) systematically analyzed the student registration data of Peking University and Soochow University and discovered that the proportion of children from working-class families in these universities was close to or slightly exceeded their proportion in the general population (30% at Peking University and 40% at Soochow University). Furthermore, modern research indicates that, for a long time, the Gaokao has been a primary means for rural students in China to obtain urban residency and enter the upper echelons of society (Liu, 2002). A nationwide survey conducted in the mid-1990s showed that only 11% of people born with rural hukou (household registration) had obtained urban hukou at the time of the survey, with half of these cases achieved through higher education and intergenerational mobility (Wu & Treiman, 2004). However, while the Gaokao is believed to “to some extent facilitate reasonable and fair social class mobility” (Fan, 2005), only students who can attend prestigious universities and who are likely to secure high-income, high-status jobs in the job market can genuinely move into the upper class. In other words, although higher education has become more widespread, opportunities for elite education remain scarce. Data show that the number of ordinary higher education institutions in China increased from 1,022 in 1998 to 2,820 in 2023, and the number of undergraduate institutions increased from 684 in 2004 to 1,275 in 2023. Despite the substantial increase in enrollment, the gates of elite universities have not opened significantly wider. In fact, the hierarchical structure within the education system means that elite universities receive more government resources and can attract better students, resulting in the job market clearly distinguishing between students from different types of universities. Graduates from elite universities are more likely to enter higher social strata (Wu, 2016). Furthermore, the French sociologist Bourdieu noted in his book *The State Nobility* that graduates of the École Polytechnique and Sciences Po almost equally share all the top positions in France’s 25 largest companies, while most graduates from ordinary engineering schools, business schools, or law schools at regular universities work in relatively

smaller companies (Bourdieu, 1998). As educational outcomes directly determine future development, learners' aspirations for upward social mobility translate into a competitive struggle for access to quality educational resources and admission to elite schools (Liu, 2002). Overall, researching higher education, social mobility, and the acquisition of elite status in China is of great significance for understanding the class mobility facilitated by the Gaokao. Existing research on the impact of the Gaokao on high school students predominantly focuses on learners' psychology, as psychological issues related to the Gaokao are not uncommon among high school students. Students with poorer academic performance are more anxious than those with better grades; rural students experience greater pressure than urban students, and students from non-key schools are less confident about getting into college compared to those from key schools (Sun & Chen, 2012; Wang, 2001; Zhang & Chen, 2013). From an educational sociology perspective, existing research focuses on analyzing the current state of learners, the relationship between family capital and academic anxiety, and the motivations, problems, and strategies of higher education reform. For example, regarding the current state of learners, the China Youth Research Center project team notes that there is a trend of younger students studying abroad (Fang et al., 2013). The relationship between family capital and academic anxiety can be seen with rural students striving to enter the upper social class through the Gaokao, while social elites aim to monopolize quality higher education opportunities through the education system (Liu, 2002; Wu, 2016). And the motivations, problems, and strategies of higher education reform refer to, for example, how to fairly set up independent college admissions and achieve equalization of educational opportunities through college expansion (Fan, 2005). Currently, little research explores the impact of exam culture on learners' capital accumulation and identity construction. Furthermore, existing research on the LOTE community in China mostly examines learners' LOTE learning motivations from a psychological perspective, with insufficient attention to identity construction on a social level. Although middle school students have not officially started working, they do not engage in learning practices in a vacuum. As a cultural phenomenon, the Gaokao significantly influences the ideologies of schools, parents, and learners.

Additionally, the Gaokao has a unique social effect, enabling individuals to achieve upward social mobility and ascend in economic and political status. Therefore, in the context of Chinese society, exploring how the

ideology of examination and advancement influences high school LOTE learners' investment decisions and identity construction is of significant value and practical importance.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study uses the investment model proposed by Darvin and Norton as its theoretical framework, positioning second language investment at the intersection of capital, identity, and ideology (Darvin & Norton, 2015). The investment theory posits that by learning a language, learners choose an identity, expressing their “desire to be part of an imagined community or to take on an imagined identity” (p. 47). Because the environment in which learners operate is inherently influenced and dominated by ideologies, such as race and social class, learners must “negotiate the relationship between communicative practices and systemic patterns of control at both micro and macro levels” (p. 43). Finally, learners can utilize their existing capital, such as material resources, social networks, language skills, etc., to gain benefits and perceive the value of this capital. Existing research on investment theory regarding learners reveals the multiple relationships between investment, capital accumulation, social identity, and imagined identity. Regarding investment and capital accumulation, Chang and Chiang note that Japanese immigrant children see after-school tutoring centers, known as *juku*, as a place to connect with higher-status classmates and expand their social network (Chang & Chiang, 2024), thereby investing in these centers to gain interpersonal capital and join an imagined community. In terms of investment and social identity, Gearing and Roger found that when foreigners are positioned as “foreign language users” by local communities, they feel inequality, non-recognition, and a lack of belonging, which affects their willingness to invest in the local language (Gearing & Roger, 2018). Similarly, in a social environment where the language is a foreign language, language users may strategically use or avoid using the language to integrate or distinguish themselves from local groups (Vasilopoulos, 2015). Research indicates that learners invest not only in real communities but also in imagined communities, hoping to enhance their future identities through capital accumulation. Imagined identities can vary widely, ranging from highly professional roles, such as doctors and lawyers, to more family-oriented roles, such as housewives, to roles driven by personal interests, such as farm workers (Norton & Williams, 2012). In summary, investment theory comprises three core constructs: identity, ideology, and capital. It is often applied in social contexts where the

language being learned is the native or official language and is used to explore how learners accumulate capital under specific ideological controls to achieve social mobility and self-construction. This study employs the investment theory model to investigate how exam culture, as an ideology, controls the identity construction of LOTE learners. On the one hand, it extends the application of the investment theory to social contexts where the language being learned is a foreign language. On the other hand, it explores the reasons and motivations behind learners' choice of LOTE from a sociological perspective. This study addresses the following research questions:

To what extent do admission factors influence the identity construction of high school LOTE learners?

To what extent do admission factors influence the learning practices of high school LOTE learners?

3. METHODS

This study, conducted over one year, employs a series of qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and diaries, to comprehensively understand how learners perceive their learning and life experiences and how they construct their relationships with the external world.

3.1 Participants and Context

The study focuses on 14 high school LOTE learners enrolled in a public foreign language high school (hereinafter referred to as G school) in Shanghai. Among these learners are four males and 10 females. Three learners started learning Japanese with no prior knowledge of the language upon entering high school, three learners had no prior knowledge of French, three learners had no prior knowledge of Spanish, and five learners had three years' experience in German.

All the participants are native Chinese speakers, with English as their secondary foreign language. The learners' scores from four primary foreign language exams were considered their language proficiency level, with those ranking in the top 33% of their grade recorded as Category 1, those ranking between the 34th and 66th percentiles as Category 2, and those ranking below the 67th percentile as Category 3. The participants' details are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Information

Participant	Gender	Primary Foreign Language	Primary Foreign Language Learning Time	Primary Foreign Language Proficiency Level	Secondary Foreign Language	Secondary Foreign Language Learning Time
J1	Female	Japanese	1–2 years	Category 2	English	8 years
J2	Male	Japanese	1–2 years	Category 2	English	8 years
J3	Female	Japanese	1–2 years	Category 2	English	8 years
F1	Male	French	1–2 years	Category 2	English	8 years
F2	Female	French	1–2 years	Category 1	English	8 years
F3	Female	French	1–2 years	Category 1	English	8 years
S1	Female	Spanish	1–2 years	Category 3	English	8 years
S2	Female	Spanish	1–2 years	Category 3	English	8 years
S3	Male	Spanish	1–2 years	Category 1	English	8 years
G1	Female	German	5–6 years	Category 1	English	8 years
G2	Female	German	5–6 years	Category 1	English	8 years
G3	Female	German	5–6 years	Category 1	English	8 years
G4	Female	German	5–6 years	Category 1	English	8 years
G5	Male	German	5–6 years	Category 1	English	8 years

G school offers Japanese, German, French, and Spanish as primary foreign language options, with beginner classes available from the first year of the junior high section and the high school section. Students who have been enrolled in G school's junior section can choose to continue advanced courses in Japanese, French, Spanish, and German during high school, while new high school entrants join beginner language classes. In addition to regular high school subjects, G school offers various study abroad recommendation programs and cooperative programs. For example, French students can apply for the French engineering program, which allows them to enter French universities to study science and engineering up to postgraduate level after graduating from high school. G school encourages students to take proficiency exams in Japanese, French, Spanish, and German, setting a minimum graduation requirement for the primary foreign language proficiency, but there are no explicit academic requirements for the secondary foreign language.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In this study, data were collected over 12 months, utilizing semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and diaries.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews: I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with the learners. Each interview, approximately one hour long, was recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed into text. The interview questions explored their LOTE learning experience from five perspectives: language learning goals, learning experiences, changes encountered, challenges faced, and family environment.

Classroom observations: With the consent of the participants and their teachers, I conducted three 30-minute classroom observations for each of the Japanese, French, Spanish, and German classes. Observations focused on the classroom environment, teaching content, teacher–student interactions, and the participants' classroom engagement.

Diaries: Learners maintained diaries to record and reflect on their learning and daily lives. The diary entries included insights on learning, activities participated in, rewards received, and recent interests. Twenty diary entries were collected. I employed both inductive and deductive methods to code the data. To ensure the accuracy and objectivity of the data analysis, an independent scholar who did not participate in this study was invited to verify the coding system. This scholar analyzed 10% of the data, achieving a consistency rate of 90%. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

5. FINDINGS

After inductive analysis, three themes emerged from the interview data: learning goals, learning experiences, and the learning environment. These themes reflect the tense yet systematic study life of Chinese high school students, who need to prepare for various exams, attend classes, participate in extracurricular activities, complete homework, and pursue their hobbies in their spare time.

Learning Goals: Learners' goals can be broadly categorized into three types: pathways to further education, language proficiency levels, and future planning. Overall, regardless of whether the learners choose to continue their education domestically or study abroad, they value the various opportunities that LOTE offers. These opportunities mitigate the risks of failing the *Gaokao* by providing alternative paths for upward social mobility through the accumulation of educational and overseas study or work experiences.

Learning Experiences: Learners' experiences can be divided into four categories: daily learning routines, language and cultural exchanges,

learning perceptions, and challenges encountered. Generally, learners solve issues arising during their studies by seeking help from teachers or through extracurricular learning. Additionally, learners are highly sensitive to their academic abilities; positive academic feedback boosts their motivation, while negative academic performance impacts their engagement to varying degrees.

Learning Environment: The learning environment encompasses the learning community, which consists of classmates and teachers, the family environment, comprising parents and relatives, and the broader social environment. A healthy and positive learning community and family environment promote language learning. During data analysis, I found that students' choices of language were mostly based on their future development plans, with parents playing roles as guides, supporters, and decision makers in shaping these plans. Based on the inductive analysis, I conducted a third-level coding of the data in accordance with the investment theory (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). This is followed by the data analysis showing the relationship between domains, presented in rich description through quotations and specific evidence, and the interpretation of the data based on the guiding theoretical framework.

5.1 Choosing German: Competing for Educational Resources

One major reason learners choose German is because it is considered a "good class." After screening applicants based on their academic abilities, G school selects the top 33 students and places them in the German class. Therefore, students in the German class have stronger academic abilities, a more intense admission-oriented learning atmosphere, more invested teaching resources, and richer options for programs and exchange opportunities than the students in other language classes. G2, G3, and G5 explicitly stated that they chose German because it was a "good class." G2 even mentioned that she did not actually like German and originally chose Japanese, but her mother forcibly changed her language preference. G2 positions herself as a "good student" studying German for the resources of a "good class," with her language choice unrelated to the language itself and instead tied to accessing better resources: My mom changed my preference to German. When I was in the preparatory class, my first LOTE choice was Japanese, and German was my second choice. After my mom heard about the German "good class," she changed my preference. Because my grades were good, I was placed in the German class. In the German class, I gradually discovered the benefits of being in a good class.

But personally, even now, I still prefer to study Japanese. (German learner G2). After entering the German class, G2 and G5 found that the class cultivated their confidence. Because the students in the German class have better grades, they are more confident speaking with non-German learners in G school. Additionally, graduates of the German program from G school have a certain reputation in the local society, with a high proportion entering elite universities, and their German language skills are comparable to those of German majors. During the interview, G2 mentioned a senior who, although not a German major, won an exchange spot by defeating German major students, highlighting the overall ability of G school's German students. It is evident that being in a "good class" brings a sense of superiority to the learners, positioning them as more competitive "good students" in both G school and the local community. We have a very impressive senior sister who is currently studying at Fudan University. She is not a German major; she loves philosophy and is majoring in a related field. Our philosophy major senior defeated the German major students and secured one of the two exchange spots between Fudan and the German embassy. (German learner G2) In the exam screening system, entering a "good class" means entering a specialized pathway to elite universities. Students' evaluation of the "good class" is also about "studying hard," with a better learning atmosphere and more opportunities for support and advancement. Even if they do not like the language they are studying, they choose German to develop self-discipline that is beneficial for the *Gaokao*, enjoy more experienced teachers, and gain more competition and exchange opportunities than the students in other language programs.

5.2 LOTE Gaokao: Achieving Higher Scores through Different Assessment Standards

Learners primarily choose LOTE because G school requires its enrolled students to have LOTE as their primary foreign language. Some learners join LOTE courses solely to obtain the status of being a student in G school. For S2, the importance of "entering a high school" outweighs "learning English." Similarly, other learners, such as S1, S3, J1, and J2, began studying LOTE for the same reasons. J2 mentioned that he failed to enter a key high school following the high school entrance exam and that G school was the best high school he could attend, so he began studying Japanese after weighing the pros and cons. While some students choose LOTE out of interest, many compromise their language choices to gain

educational opportunities. I chose to learn Spanish because I wanted to attend a high school. The requirements for the Japanese in *Gaokao* are quite high, German is difficult to learn, and French is for the science and engineering program, so I chose Spanish. Yes, the school requires us to learn a language other than English, but if I could learn English, I wouldn't choose Spanish. My parents actually didn't want me to be so stressed. (Spanish learner S2). Furthermore, some learners suggest that using LOTE might result in higher scores than using English in the *Gaokao* because different languages have different admission proficiency requirements: Most high school students have been learning English since elementary school, so it's not easy to widen the score gap in the *Gaokao* English exam. The difficulty of the *Gaokao* Spanish exam is different from that of the English exam; for example, the vocabulary requirements are different. Moreover, Spanish grammar doesn't have as many changes as English, so I think spending three years studying Spanish well might have a better effect than studying English in *Gaokao*. (Spanish learner S3) LOTE learners intend to gain better scores in *Gaokao* by using LOTE and value the second chance that LOTE provides. German learners plan to apply to German universities while applying to Chinese universities at the same time. Students are restricted when using *Gaokao* scores to apply to universities in China. However, applying to foreign universities is not contradictory to applying to Chinese universities, and one can pursue both options simultaneously. If they fail the *Gaokao*, they still have the option of studying abroad: As long as you pass the German language proficiency test and meet the minimum requirement for domestic college entrance exams, I mean *Gaokao*, you can attend public universities in Germany. Applying to domestic and foreign universities is not contradictory. For example, if Shanghai Jiao Tong University is my first choice domestically, I can choose the University of Munich as my first choice abroad. If my grades are excellent enough, I may get offers from both universities. (German learner G2). In summary, language investment for LOTE learners in G schools is influenced by identity, capital, and ideology. Learners face the condition of having to study LOTE to enroll in G school, but they also see the perceptible benefits of using LOTE, such as achieving better *Gaokao* scores and being able to apply to foreign universities to spread the risk of failing the *Gaokao*.

5.3 Overseas Study: Pioneering a New Track

Some learners study LOTE with the aim of studying abroad. These

learners generally come from well-off families but lack competitive academic abilities or have noticeable shortcomings, making it difficult for them to obtain admission to elite universities in China. Therefore, they set their sights on outstanding schools in developed countries. J1, a Japanese learner, is such a “well-resourced lower performers.” J1’s parents are Japanese teachers, and J1 entered the foreign language high school through their parents’ social connections. J1’s parents, having experienced learning and teaching Japanese, created a detailed study plan for J1, aiming to help J1 excel in Japanese to obtain a recommendation for Japanese universities from G school or participate in the Examination for Japanese University Admission (EJU): Now, the minimum requirement for school recommendation or the EJU is passing N2. My father has a different opinion. He thinks if I take the N2 exam in December as arranged by G school, I won’t be able to take the N1 until next July. By then, everyone will have an N1 certificate, but I won’t perform as well in my studies compared to them, so the benefit to my enrollment would be minimal. Therefore, the time schedule my father has set for me is to take the N1 directly this December and then apply to Japanese universities. At that time, most of my classmates wouldn’t have passed the N1 yet, so even if they have better overall grades than me, I would still have some advantages in language proficiency. (Japanese learner J1). Similarly, J2, who has been studying English since childhood, excels in English with a TOEFL score of 110. However, his mathematics is weak, and for this reason, he did not get into a local high school. After analyzing the pros and cons, J2 believes that his weakness in mathematics may also affect his Gaokao results. Therefore, after entering G school and choosing to study Japanese, he decided to shift his focus to taking the EJU and getting into Waseda University, an elite university in Japan: My TOEFL score has reached 110, so I can already apply for the SGU [Super Global University] program at 13 prestigious universities in Japan, like the University of Tokyo, and 24 Type B universities, like Meiji University. SGU programs are taught in English, and the requirement is a TOEFL score of at least 90. The tuition fees are not cheap, by the way. Therefore, those who are not good at English, or cannot afford the tuition fees withdraw from the competition. That is to say, I almost secure the spot in ‘Type B universities’ SGU program. With SGU as my backup, I am charging ahead into the EJU without hesitation. Other classmates may still be preparing for the *Gaokao*, but I have already given up on it. My mathematics is not competitive here but is sufficient for the EJU. In China, I may only be able to attend a

second-tier university, but my target in Japan is Waseda. (Japanese learner J2) J1 and J2's common feature is that they have academic shortcomings and lack competitiveness in the *Gaokao*, but they also have significant resource advantages, especially support from their families. For example, J1's parents are Japanese teachers who are fully involved in J1's Japanese learning, helping J1 accumulate cultural capital. Meanwhile, J2 has an advantage in English, and his parents are willing to provide financial support. J1 and J2 represent the positioning of some LOTE learners, whose academic abilities may not match those of their peers in China but are competitive applicants abroad due to different academic assessment standards in different countries. Thus, with economic and social resources, they switch to a different track to compete for high-quality higher education resources abroad. Another group of LOTE learners aiming for overseas education focuses on the foreseeable benefits of studying abroad. They aspire to achieve regional mobility through studying abroad and accumulating experiences in social, cultural, learning, and work settings in more developed countries and regions. G4, a German learner, is influenced by her fondness for the German language and culture. Alongside expanding her horizons through language learning, her values have also been influenced, leading to behavioral changes. Consequently, she is particularly eager to study and live in Germany for a period, experiencing a deeper understanding of its culture of freedom, democracy, and environmental responsibility: I feel that German has had a profound impact on me. I used to not have such a keen interest in multiculturalism, but after learning a foreign language, I saw the world. In our German class, I heard about "flight shame," where some Germans believe that flying damages the atmosphere and is a behavior that is irresponsible to the world, so they refuse to fly. I know that airplanes do pollute the environment to some extent, as do cars and trains, but I never knew there were people with such an ideology. So now my dream is to go to many places and immerse myself in local life. I also practice environmental protection. For example, this winter I spent over a month in a tropical seaside city in China, where there is actually a lot of garbage on the beaches, so I would go to the beach every morning to pick up trash. (German learner G4) In addition to an interest in different cultures, some learners focus on the overseas job opportunities and high returns that studying abroad can bring. For participants in the French engineering program, their main reason for choosing French is that the "program is good." The term "good program" can be explained by several factors: a) The science and engineering program

does not require participation in the *Gaokao*, relieving students' stress; b) the mathematical and science subjects studied in the program have already been covered in China or are even simpler than the domestic content, so even if taught in French, students would find it easy to understand; c) the engineering program allows direct enrollment in graduate studies in France, providing a guarantee of qualifications; d) engineering majors have good employment prospects in France with good welfare benefits. I learned French because it's part of an engineering program, and I wanted to study electronic engineering, which aligns with my professional ideals. At the same time, this program is excellent. We joke among classmates about "going to France, studying engineering, and making big money" If we're talking about foreign languages, I actually prefer Japanese, but the future prospects also attract me, so I never considered Japanese and chose the French engineering program as soon as I came in. (French learner F1)

Learners in the French engineering program represent some LOTE learners who value high-quality foreign employment opportunities, plan to advance their class status through regional mobility, and ultimately achieve career advancement. Not only French learners but also Japanese learner J1, German learner G1, and Spanish learner S1 mentioned their hopes of finding a job overseas through studying abroad. For college graduates, higher wages abroad and valuable experiences gained can potentially lead to promotions to higher levels in the workplace upon returning home.

5.4 Self-Discipline: Cultivating Discipline Under the Influence of Exam Culture

Within the school environment, outstanding students are generally associated with comprehensive development in morality, intelligence, and physical fitness, with academic performance being the most emphasized aspect of this "comprehensive development." To obtain or reinforce their identity as good students, learners will constrain and discipline themselves to cultivate good study habits. For example, French learner F2 exceeds the teacher's learning tasks every day, while G2, participating in German knowledge competitions, memorizes all their teammates' questions to ensure their team's excellent ranking: I'm the class monitor, maybe a bit of a perfectionist. Whenever I take part in any competitions, my team has to achieve good results. Last time, in the German knowledge competition at our foreign language festival, I teamed up with a senior and a junior from G school to participate in the contest. The three of us actually had our own tasks, each responsible for a part. However, because I'm a perfectionist, I

also memorized their parts. During the tie-breaker question, the junior had a problem; he couldn't remember what he memorized. Fortunately, I was prepared and could immediately take over his part. (German learner G2)

For "good students," self-discipline is interpreted as making full preparations, not missing any opportunities, and continuously accumulating positive results, ultimately surpassing other classmates. German learner G4 stated that she has gained many opportunities to participate in German debates and competitions, most of which are at the provincial or national level. Without the good results she achieved in school activities, examinations, and competitions, she would not be able to enter the candidate list ranked by grades or competition experience: I'm going to participate in the National High School German Debate Competition soon. If I win, I can participate in the German summer camp for free, which will also benefit my application to German prestigious universities. So I've been super busy lately, spending all my free time practicing German, memorizing and speaking, preparing arguments and expressions. Then during breaks and lunchtime, I practice with my classmates, or ask the teacher to coach me on debating. I think I have a talent for learning languages, but talent alone is not enough. Everyone participating in the competition has talent, so I still need to put in more effort to prepare. I've basically won first or second place every time I've competed, maybe that's why the teachers always give me the chance. (German learner G4)

Compared to excellent learners, "ordinary students" with average proficiency levels will also change their learning styles to strive for advancement toward a "higher status" for better exam scores. For example, J3 mentioned the following in an interview, I used to study English by merely reading books in the original, and I did pretty well. Now, I can't do without memorizing vocabulary and grammar for Japanese, so in order to pass the exam, I have to change my study strategy to be more systematic and diligent. Additionally, students' oral and written skills will change according to the exam evaluation criteria. For example, German language teachers repeatedly emphasize that students must pay attention to the logic in expression, meaning they need to present central viewpoints first and then develop arguments. Following this principle may lead to good grades in speaking and writing tests. All German learners mentioned this change in their LOTE learning. Furthermore, schools promote students' pursuit of "excellence" and identity construction through forms of recognition and differential treatment. After each exam, the head teacher of each class will award certificates to the top scorer in each subject. F3 consistently ranks

first in French, and receiving the French certificate every time makes her “feel great.” As the second best in French in the class, F2’s goal is to challenge F3 and “get first place once.” Additionally, “differential treatment” itself is a means for teachers to teach students according to their abilities, but students will sensitively perceive this difference and use it for identity positioning. German learner G2 discovered, “Teachers always ask more difficult questions to students with good grades, while those with poorer grades get simpler questions.” In order to gain the teacher’s favor, many learners will increase their investment in language learning; as G1 said, “One big motivation for me to memorize vocabulary is to answer the teacher’s questions in class and then be praised by the teacher.” In conclusion, based on the analysis of the data within the investment model proposed by Darwin and Norton, (Darvin & Norton, 2015) it is evident that learners choose German to compete for educational resources, while those opting for the French engineering program aim for career advancement. Some LOTE learners preparing for the *Gaokao* believe that different assessment standards among languages can help them achieve higher *Gaokao* scores. Meanwhile, some LOTE learners aiming for overseas education have given up the *Gaokao*, and are instead participating in the higher education competition in LOTE countries, leveraging their advantages to achieve better admission outcomes. Overall, the exam culture influences LOTE learners’ identity construction and capital accumulation. For instance, learners construct their identities as good students through self-discipline; those studying Japanese for the EJU no longer study *Gaokao* subjects but instead focus on EJU subjects.

6. DISCUSSION

As a cultural phenomenon, the *Gaokao* has evolved into an ideological factor influencing Chinese society and culture, controlling students’ language learning practices and identity construction. This section discusses the impact of admission factors on Chinese high school LOTE learners, including the competition for educational resources, the expansion of the competition scope for studying abroad, and the accumulation of capital through self-discipline and identity construction. Firstly, for LOTE learners in G school, the competition for the “resource-rich” language, German, reflects the competition for educational resources in society. Although students seemingly have a variety of language choices, if they want to obtain admission opportunities to elite universities through

the college entrance exam, they must first secure a place in the “good class” in the school. In this study, the “good class” established by G school with high-quality teaching staff is equivalent to “key schools” with richer resources in society. The role of key schools in the university selection process is evident; data show that among students admitted to three elite universities—Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Renmin University of China—80% come from provincial or national key schools, with an additional 16% from county-level key schools (Wu, 2016). The system of key schools and the examination system in China filter students’ abilities, and those who enter the “key” circles are more likely to obtain opportunities for quality higher education. Secondly, learners’ desire for upward social mobility has transformed into a battle for access to quality educational resources and eligibility for admission to elite schools, even triggering the global distribution of higher education resources. Data show that the number of people going to traditional study destinations, such as Europe and the United States, continues to increase. By 2025, the number of international students worldwide is expected to rise to over 8 million (Li & Sun, 2018). From the case of LOTE learners in G school, to obtain better education and development, many learners with special advantages or top students now apply to study at world-class top universities. Comparing graduate salaries, for example, for a Class of 2024 bachelor in the United States, the salary can range from USD 61,000 to USD 76,000 per year. Such a salary is difficult for a Chinese graduate to find in their first job, the annual salary for their first job is generally not high. According to Mycos’s 2022 data, 57.7% of graduates with bachelor’s degrees in China earned less than 72,000 RMB per year, 35.4% earned between 72,000 RMB and 120,000 RMB, and only 6.9% earned more than 120,000 RMB per year. In this study, learners in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields hope to find job opportunities locally or earn higher salaries through STEM subjects. The benefits of this career choice can be supported by data from the above-mentioned salary surveys, which demonstrate that graduates with bachelor’s degrees for STEM majors were expected to be top-paid in both China, with an average of 85,000 RMB per year, and in US, with an average of USD 74,000 per year. The intensified competition in employment has led to pressure on secondary school learners. To achieve better development, higher salaries, or higher social status, learners either compete for learning resources or expand their competition scope from China to the whole world. Lastly, learners engage in self-discipline to achieve better results, including cultivating better study

habits, improving concentration, and striving for higher rankings. These behaviors have been proven to be effective. McNabb's (McNabb, 2017) research shows that students' exam scores are positively correlated with their level of effort, study plans, and clarity of learning goals. Self-discipline is not a pejorative term; it is simply the process of students pursuing the identity of a "good student." In fact, many universities at home and abroad highly value the self-discipline and academic abilities formed by students during this self-shaping process. Countries such as Germany, France, Italy, and Spain use *Gaokao* scores as direct admission criteria, competing for excellent Chinese students. Chinese learners' self-discipline reflects cultural differences between China and the West. In Norton's (Peirce, 1995) study, self-esteem and confidence have a strong impact on the happiness of Westerners, while external factors such as academic performance, further education, and career planning have a strong impact on the happiness of Chinese students. Under such differences, parents and schools encourage students to "study hard" to obtain better career development and higher social status.

7. CONCLUSION

This study, which lasted for one year, utilized a series of qualitative research methods to explore the impact of admission factors on the identity construction and learning practices of high school LOTE learners. The research found that high school LOTE learners' investment in language mainly revolves around obtaining better opportunities for higher education or career development. Under the influence of admission factors, learners' pursuit of upward social mobility and elite identity construction is reflected in the following aspects: 1) competition for quality educational resources; 2) striving for upward social mobility channels abroad through international regional mobility; 3) leveraging family social, cultural, and economic advantages to maintain and transmit their own advantages; and 4) self-discipline.

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