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# Global and national identity construction in ELF

## A longitudinal case study on four Chinese students

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This longitudinal case study explored how four Chinese university students constructed their global and national identities while learning English and using it as a lingua franca in the course of four undergraduate years. Qualitative research methods were adopted. Primary data were obtained through open interviews, and supplementary data sources included student journals, classroom observations, and Internet postings. Analysis showed that the students constructed multiple kinds of global identities and a prominent Chinese national identity in their engagement with ELF. The national and the global were often dialogically related. The ELF-associated identities, particularly the global, were often embedded in their membership in selected communities of practice and imagined communities. The students were also found to exercise their agencies in choosing their target communities. The study showed both the pervasiveness and variation of identity work with ELF.

**Keywords:** global identity, national identity, ELF, community of practice, imagined community

## Introduction

In the context of globalization, native speakers' sole ownership of English has been challenged by new conceptualizations, an important one being "English as a Lingua Franca" (ELF), which refers to "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7). Developed from an earlier concept of English as an International Language (EIL), ELF can be taken as a reality, construct, paradigm, or movement (Pakir, 2009). Together with other conceptualizations such as "World Englishes" (WE) (Kachru, 1992) and "global Englishes" (Pennycook, 2007), ELF opposes the

monolithic standard of English "native speakers" (NSs) and stresses the equality of English users with different L1 backgrounds. While WE focuses more on the Kachruvian "Outer Circle" and global Englishes emphasizes linguacultural hybridity, ELF focuses primarily on the Kachruvian "Expanding Circle," previously "English as a foreign language context," with less clear evidence of independent linguistic "varieties." In recent years, ELF research has been gaining momentum. There have appeared heated theoretical discussions and emerging empirical studies regarding ELF and identity construction. Taking ELF as a general background of use and learning, this study examined global and local identity construction among individual university students in mainland China.

## Literature review

In the past decade, one issue has attracted increasing attention, i.e., whether ELF is relevant to cultural (e.g., national, ethnic) identities. While there is little doubt that WE can serve to mark local cultural identities, e.g., Chinese English as a marker of Chinese identity (Liang, 2011), it is not all that clear if ELF, a contact language that "has no native speakers" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7), will embody cultural identities. Some critics contend that ELF entails an idealist rationalism in which "cultural and linguistic borders have melted away" (O'Regan, 2014, p. 548). As such, it is hardly relevant to cultural identity construction. Others believe that ELF users assert and communicate their identities through connections with various communities of practice (Seidlhofer, 2009), which may well be related to local or global cultures.

Emerging empirical studies mainly focused on aspects of identity construction with ELF, such as actual linguistic interaction, language attitude, and effects of pedagogical intervention. Sung's (2014a) interview-based case study examined Hong Kong students' accent preferences in ELF communication, and their desired identities as global citizens. The study found great individual variation in accent attitudes, and also in meanings of global identities in ELF communication. Another study by Sung (2014b) on Hong Kong college students found variations in the participants' preferred identities associated with ELF communication — some foregrounded either local or global identities, whereas others embraced hybrid, glocal identities. Ke and Cahyani (2014) examined how ELF online communication activities affected Taiwan and Indonesian students' attitudes, identities and relations with English. They found that English was "decoupled" from the participants' local identity. Participants' beliefs about English remained consistent with the traditional NS-based English language teaching paradigm. Yet they favored NS English not because of identification with NSs, but for reasons of hospitality, or one's market value enhancement.

Some studies examined English and identity construction in the Kachruvian Expanding Circle, without explicitly using the term ELF. In a German context, Erling (2007) studied the sociolinguistic profile of students of English at Freie Universität Berlin, which had a close relationship with the US. It was found that English-German bilingualism was the norm. English played a role in the students' creation or re-creation of local, national, European and global identities. Moreover, the ability to use English was intricately tied with the (re)definition of what it meant to be (educated, urban) German. Adopting interviews and diaries as the primary data source, Gu's (2010) two-year longitudinal study on Chinese college students identified three stages in the national identity development related with English learning, i.e., admiration of English-speaking cultures, antagonism towards alien things, and conciliation between the national and global. In an ethnographic research study during the Beijing Olympic Games, Gao (2010) observed the initiation and change of an English wall slogan in an Olympic Games venue. The observed change demonstrated identity development from the Chinese national only, to the global and deepened national identities.

Not all studies provided full support for explicit existence of global identities. Roger's interview study on seven South Korean students showed that "the desire to become a global citizen or forge a bicultural (global and national) identity was certainly not a universal aspiration" (Roger, 2010, p. 16). Some participants categorically rejected the global citizen label. For many, English retained particularly strong associations with the US and the UK. The author warned researchers to avoid "ascribing" particular identities to English language learners without regard for their individual perspectives. In mainland China, ELF has been introduced and discussed in recent years. The still limited research mostly focused on ELF perspectives of language teaching, e.g., at the pragmatic level (Chen & Li, 2015), or construction of ELF teaching models (Rau, 2015; Wen, 2012, 2014). Explicit research on ELF and identity construction is still rare.

The above review shows that empirical studies on ELF and identity construction are not large in number. This may be partially attributed to the common (mis) belief that identity is not relevant to ELF. Although it has been proposed theoretically that ELF identities are associated with various "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983), as in L2 identity construction in general (Norton Pierce, 1995, Norton, 2001), empirical studies grounding ELF identities in such communities have been limited. Moreover, in existing studies on identity construction in ELF, contradicting results have been found on global identities; less is known about local identities. Further exploration is needed.

## Conceptual background and research questions

In this paper, ELF is taken in a general sense, as the use of English as a medium of communication among speakers of different first languages, without excluding native speakers of English. The learning of English for that general purpose is considered ELF learning. We follow Jenkins (2006) and Seidlhofer (2009) that there are more common grounds than differences between ELF and WE, in challenging the monolithic standard of NSs in the context of globalization. We also believe that as identity is pervasive in communication and individuals always have their stances in language use, ELF use and learning can well be seen "as expressions of identities and evidence of the sense of ownership of the language" (Seidlhofer, 2009, p. 240).

"Communities of practice" (CoPs) and "imagined communities" (ICs) are two basic concepts in this study. CoPs are groups where learners are socialized through "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). CoPs are characterized by the participants' mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). ICs are subjectively envisioned communities that transcend time and space (Norton, 2001). Related to ICs are "imagined identities" (Norton, 2001) or "ideal selves" (Dörnyei, 2005) that L2 learners will invest in. ELF use is bound to be related to certain CoPs at present, and certain ICs or future CoPs.

The research questions of the present study were the following:

1.  What kinds of global and local identities, if any, were constructed in the participants' engagement with ELF? How were these identities related to each other?
2.  What communities of practice and imagined communities did the participant associate themselves with, in their engagement with ELF? How did these communities contribute to their construction of global and local identities?
3.  How did the participants exercise their agencies in this process of identity construction?

## Methodology

### Participants

Participants were four Chinese undergraduate students from universities in Beijing, with their demographical features shown in Table 1. These four cases were selected from a larger pool of over 50 students, based on their identity differences and full-fledgedness of data. These cases were not to represent all participant types, but to capture multiplicity of chosen communities and identities.

**Table 1.** Demographic features of participants

| Pseudonym | Gao Jie | Xia Jingming | Bian Na | Wen Yan |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | Male | Female | Female |
| Major | Computer Science | Civil Engineering | English | English (double major in Economics) |
| University Type | Key university of science and technology | Ordinary university of science and technology | Foreign language university | Comprehensive university |

### Data collection and analysis

Interviews were the primary data source. For each participant, a series of eight interviews were conducted in Chinese from 2005 to 2009, at each semester end. Interview themes included English learning experiences over the semester, feelings about the learning process, attitudes towards English and English learning, future expectations regarding English use and learning, experiences of and attitudes towards recent intercultural events, sense of self as related to English learning, and differences of the above aspects as compared with the past. An extra interview was conducted with those interviewees who served as Olympic Games volunteers in Year 3, focusing on their experiences during the event. Supplementary data sources included (1) learning journals in English (17 broad journal topics on English learning attitude, motivation and identity development,[1] written by all); (2) classroom observation (by a non-participant observer, basically three times each semester); (3) students' Internet postings (occasionally, tracked through interview materials or based on chance); (4) informal feedback regarding the students' performance given by their instructors, who were also members of the research team.

All students were invited to participate in the study upon university entrance on a voluntary basis. Individual interviews, Internet data collection and most of the observations were carried out independently by graduate students who were research team members but had no direct institutional or personal relations with the students' English instructors. The journal writing invitation and feedback were conducted by the students' English instructors, who were also on the research team.

Thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts and other types of qualitative data to sort out categories of identity development through time. Data of different sources were triangulated and integrated in response to the research questions.

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1.  For a complete list of these journal topics, see Gao, Jia and Zhou (2015).

## Findings

The findings regarding the four students will be presented case by case. For each individual case, ELF-associated global and national identities, associated with various chosen CoPs and ICs, will be discussed respectively.

### Gao Jie's story

Gao Jie transferred to his preferred Department of Computer Science from the Department of Electronic Science and Technology, after his freshman year. Aiming at the future community of international IT professionals, he invested in various kinds of practices in related CoPs.

*1. Global identity: From a student to an international IT professional*
Avid English reader. Jie was highly motivated to improve his English proficiency upon college entrance, out of his desire to communicate with international academics in his field. "*I am eager to improve my ability to gather information through English reports, publishments* [publications] *and the ability to communicating with foreigners*" (J1).[2] As a freshman, he "*read the* Feynman Lectures on Physics, *a book written by a famous physicist*" (I2). Although reading English textbooks was harder than reading the translated versions in Chinese, he "*found it more interesting to read the English versions*" (I2). After his successful transfer to the Department of Computer Science, the desire for disciplinary identity development inspired him to use English as a tool to access advanced technology. He began to "*read English books on computer science…I have finished over half of this thick book* (on Java language)" (I4). He was well aware that English was essentially THE lingua franca in computer science and invested accordingly. Besides textbooks, English computer science websites also attracted Jie's attention. He liked to "*read materials on international websites*" because "*We don't have many up-to-date computer science books here in China. Those translated versions are one year or two years behind the original ones*" (I3). His basic target for English proficiency was "*to understand English materials as easily as I understand Chinese ones*" (I3).

 *Competition participant*. While learning computer science with ELF, Jie gradually moved from an input stage to a trial output stage. Starting from Year 2, he participated in a number of computer science competitions with English as the

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**2.** Data code examples: "J1" — the 1st journal; "I2" — interview in Semester 2; "OI" — Olympics interview; "O8" — observation in Semester 8; "W7" — web posting in Semester 7. Interview excerpts are translated from Chinese. English journal excerpts are in the original form. Necessary rephrasing is provided in parentheses.

working language, such as the International Collegiate Programming Contest organized by the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), an international learned society for computing. He and fellow participants had "*got to answer several written questions* (mostly on computer programming) *at the beginning of the contest. All the questions were in English, and there was no Chinese. So, English is really important*" (I3). Though his team did not succeed in getting into the next round, he enjoyed participation in this activity, because "*it forced me to learn both computer science and English well*" (I3). In Year 3, Jie and several students participated in another international competition as a team, the Microsoft Imagine Cup Competition. Each team was required to submit a project-planning report in English. Jie and his team members spent a whole month working on their report. "*It's very difficult for us to complete this report. We must learn. I learned English very hard at that time. I got a strong driving force*" (I5). Even though his team did not win prizes, he became more aware of his limitations, and more determined to improve his ELF competence in computer science.

*Academic English user*. Jie's diligence earned him the qualification for Master of Sciences candidateship at a prestigious university. In his senior year, he established contacts with doctoral candidates in the target university. This academic community challenged him with both English and professional learning. When he helped a doctoral candidate with a research project, he had to read "*over 30 English papers*", which was difficult (I8). Jie completed his task well and appeared as the second author in the eventually published English paper, chiefly written by the first author. "*My supervisor thought I could have written up an English paper based on my part of the work, and could have been the first author. Well, to be honest, I haven't got the ability to write an English paper as the senior student did. This is a barrier in my development.…. I suddenly realized I still have a long way to go*" (I8).

*Workplace English user*. In Year 3, Jie got an intern position at a transnational IT company, where English was the working language. At that time, he found writing emails to his boss "*most embarrassing*", because "*it was difficult to express my ideas clearly in English, and it was even more difficulty to talk about computer science technology with him in English*" (I6). As he continued this internship in Year 4, his work was gradually approved by his boss, and he found, as he wrote in a journal, "*I am more and more accustomed to a world filled with the English alphabets*" (J5). He had to write a "*weekly strategy report*" in English; he had to communicate with an American marketing manager from the client company. "*Every time I got her email, I will paraphrase her ideas in my own English and check with her, to make sure my understanding is correct*" (I7). Besides, Jie made effort to enrich his English language repertoire: When writing English emails, "*I am tired of using simple vocabulary and sentence patterns. I need to turn to reference books and dictionaries for help if I want to diversify my use of English*" (I7). Before his graduation, Jie had

completed a number of projects in his intern position. With persistent effort, he was well on his way to become an international IT professional.

## 2. National identity: "Chinese boy"

Jie seemed to hold an open attitude to Western cultural traditions. In 2006, ten Chinese Ph.D. candidates declared to boycott Christmas celebration in defense of Chinese cultural traditions, which generated a public debate.[3] In response to the event, Jie said, "*We Chinese people should be tolerant. It's true that we need to protect our traditional Chinese culture, but we don't have to overreact. That's not right. It doesn't make sense to boycott*" (I3). When confronting critical events for the nation, he showed a very strong national identity. When the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008 occurred, varied comments on the disaster relief of the Chinese government appeared on international media. Jie formed a habit of reading international newspapers and magazines during that time. "*I would read Chinese newspapers first and then those reports on CNN, BBC and* The Economist. *I don't like what was said on* The Economist, *all of which were negative. So I registered an account on* The Economist *website in order to give my comments*" (I6). The account name he registered on the website was CNBOY, meaning "Chinese Boy". "*I've written comments three or four times*" in defense of the relief work by the Chinese government, which made him "*feel better*" (I6). His national identity was highlighted in his active use of ELF on international forums.

## 3. Summary

The most prominent dimensions of Gao Jie's global identity construction were academic and professional. He shifted to computer science, a highly globalized academic and professional field. Communication within CoPs in this field necessarily involved ELF. Jie's learning of his major and of English were naturally tied up. His productive language skills were greatly improved as he engaged in ELF practices such as project competitions, and internship in an international IT enterprise. Such participation helped to turn him into a legitimate (peripheral) member of respective CoPs. In its turn, his dynamic membership construction in these CoPs pushed him closer to his imagined identity as a competent international IT professional.

On the cultural dimension, Jie's identity development seemed less full-fledged and sophisticated. Yet both global awareness and national identity were evident. His national identity was enhanced in a global media context, through active use of ELF in opinion expression.

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**3.**  http://news.sina.com.cn/s/p/2006-12-21/103811850958.shtml.

*Xia Jingming's story*

Xia Jingming believed that English had great practical value, but more important to him was a relaxed, casual and fun lifestyle associated with English. He lived his global identity as a popular culture fan.

*1. Global identity: Popular culture fan*

Jingming was a tall and fashionable-looking young man who frequently used the words "fun" and "cool" when interviewed. He pursued a strong interest in English songs, movies, computer games, and the like. The use of English helped him to become a member in various virtual communities of global popular culture.

*English song and movie lover*. Jingming became keen on English songs and movies before entering university. For him English was an entertainment in daily life. "*I'm interested in learning English because I like English songs, English films and talking with people of English. I don't think I'm a good English learner. For example, words and grammar, I always can't stick to study English words day after day, and I only read words, never want to write down them*" (J2). However, when he came across new words in an English song he really loved, "*in order to learn that song, I will look up the words in the dictionary*" (I1). In addition to songs, he also found it "*especially interesting to watch English movies*" (I1). Out of his love for English songs and movies, he approached the related virtual communities: "*I especially want to visit the English websites for foreign music or music videos. I often surf online and log onto related websites. I love them very much*" (I2). In Year 2, Jingming tried to make fuller use of popular cultural materials. Although "fun" was a high-frequency word when he talked about English songs and movies, he made conscious efforts in learning. "*Some songs were very beautiful. I downloaded the lyrics, printed them out, and recited them*" (I4). He also paid attention to the lines in movies which were inspiring to him. "*When hearing the classic lines in movies, I would listen carefully and then type them down and post them onto my blog. I would like to read them again and again. I really love reading them. It was fun*" (I4).

*Computer game player*. With the development of computer science, the wide spread of computer games around the globe has engaged many young people, through ELF. Jingming was among them. "*It was very interesting to play those kinds of English games. You need to understand those guides and conversations in order to finish the tasks, for example, going through a narrow trail, looking for a wrench or a key to start a car*" (I6). In his dormitory, Jingming and his roommates sometimes shouted English words or phrases while playing computer games. "*Some may shout 'good ball' when we were playing football computer games. Some may repeat the lines in the movies to show how good our English is. It is fun*" (I5). Such occasional mix of English words served to connect communities in the virtual and

real worlds, and created a special context. In this context, English functioned not merely or mainly as a lingua franca for communication, but a symbol of life style preference, young men's gender identity, and solidarity.

*Forum participant.* In Year 3, Jingming popped onto forums of English learning, some of which used English as a lingua franca. "*You can always meet good English learners on the forum. And you can learn from them when you have difficulties in English. It's very helpful*" (I5). Besides receiving useful information, he also produced his own ELF postings. "*Once I wrote a post about my kitten. I had two kittens before and one of them died of disease. I was very sad. I wrote the story and posted it onto the forum. The story was very touching. I got feedback from other netizens and made lots of friends*" (I5). Participants on this forum were mostly young people from various places but mainly China; they were interested in English and would like to communicate with each other in English. Jingming had a good feeling of being supported, or even a sense of belonging there: "*There will always be someone online. When you ask questions, others will help. When you say something, others will give comments. This really encourages me*" (I5).

## 2. National identity: "I wanted to clarify."

Jingming's love for pop culture with ELF was to some extent reaction against what he disliked in Chinese culture. "*Those movies reflecting the life of our peers in foreign countries particularly attract me. They are very imaginative, full of creative ideas, and very independent. I think this was what our Chinese university students lacked*" (I4). He even imagined becoming those young characters in the movies. Jingming's admiration for "foreign countries" showed his dissatisfaction and longing. Yet this was not simply due to external cultural influences on an individual, but also the individual's projection of imagined identity onto the external.

Despite admiration for "foreign cultures," Jingming maintained a stable Chinese national identity, which was especially aroused in his junior year, during events such as the Beijing Olympics and the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. When a Tibetan independence group disrupted the Olympics torch relay, he logged onto an international news website. "*I wanted to know how they distorted the facts and slandered our Chinese people. I wanted to know what they reported and what kinds of words they used. And then I wanted to clarify (the facts). So I left messages when there were spaces for readers to comment, stating … what they were saying was a distortion to our country*" (I6). With still limited competence in producing written output in ELF, Jingming's determination and effort to defend his own nation were evident.

## 3. Summary

Unlike Gao Jie with a clear goal of professional development associated with ELF, Jingming followed the "transcultural flows" (Pennycook, 2007) and engaged in

ELF practices of various kinds of global popular culture, without explicitly stated "goals" or "ideal L2 selves". Yet his ELF use and related identity development were not targeted at acculturation or integration into a specific target NS culture. Rather, he invested in ELF-mediated lifestyles and used these as general resources of social identity development, and his identity of a globalized pop culture fan was intertwined with the development of gender, age, and student identities.

Admittedly, Jingming's ELF related cultural identity was at a rather "superficial" level. It was mostly confined to "entertainment." Yet there was also the "serious" aspect of ELF use, where he asserted his Chinese national identity through participation in political debate on international forums. Despite the lack of evidence for sophisticated critical thinking and argumentation skills, and the un-discriminated conceptualization of "foreign culture" vs. "Chinese culture", using ELF to express his thoughts and feelings was no doubt a practice of global presentation of national identity.

*Bian Na's story*

After university entrance, Bian Na first worked on her identity as a competent member in the English-major CoP. Later she explored the relationship between Chinese and global cultures by engaging in practices such as being a volunteer journalist using ELF in the Beijing Olympics. With both global and national identities enhanced, she moved towards becoming an interculturalist.

*1. Global identity: Interculturalist*
*English major*. Na used to be a science student at a regular high school. Soon after university entrance, she found that "*nearly half of the classmates came from foreign language high schools*" (J2) previously with special training in English, and her self-confidence was sapped. However, the gap between herself and those good classmates turned out to be a blessing in disguise because this made her work very hard to improve English skills. She regained her confidence later when her English course scores turned out to be high. Since the second semester of Year 1, Na engaged in extra-curricular activities such as listening to English songs, watching English movies and TV series, and reading English novels (I2, I3, I4, J6, J10), which contributed to her growing interest in English learning. These activities provided her with "*idiomatic language input*", helped her keep abreast of the current language use, and made English learning "*quite fun*" (I3). At the end of Year 2, she said in retrospect "*when I first became a university student, I felt I 'was forced to work hard' since my language foundation was not that strong and the focus of our curriculum was on the training of the basic language skills. But now things have*

*changed. Because you can have access to more materials, like you can read more, listen more, and watch more, you are likely to be more interested*" (I4).

*Literature lover.* In Year 3 when required to choose a specific direction under the English major, Na chose literature. Following the curriculum focusing on British and American literature, she gradually found herself a "young lover of literature" who was not only clear about the historical development of literature, relevant theories and the ways to analyze literary work, but also able to put forward one's own opinions about a piece of work (I5, I6). Na's interest in creative writing was further developed in Year 4, when she squeezed time out of her busy schedule to write a play "*just for fun*" (I7). In this play, the two protagonists — from China and Britain respectively — "*have become symbols representing the East and the West respectively*", and Na wanted to "*compare*" the two characters and "*let them influence each other to see what the outcome might be like*" (I7). Na's play was bilingual — she used Chinese when the Chinese character was talking and English when the British character was talking, because she wanted to explore native cultural influences on the two characters respectively, and how the two characters would "*influence each other and negotiate with each other*" (I7). Although the play conception looked like simple and schematized cultural ideals, in the process of writing, Na was actualizing her ideal, imagined identity as an interculturalist, who was able to enable the meeting of two cultures.

*Olympic volunteer.* During the summer vacation at the end of Year 3, Na got a chance to volunteer for the Beijing Olympic Games. Specifically, she worked as a journalist stationed at the fencing competition site, and her tasks involved interviewing the athletes after their competition and writing up news reports in English within 20 minutes. This volunteer experience put Na in contact with athletes, coaches, officials, and other volunteers from various parts of the world. This enabled her to develop a strong sense of empathy with people, as reflected through her own values about news reporting which was different from mainstream ones in her context. "*One evening, our Chinese female team lost to the Hungarian team by a very narrow margin, and the four girls all cried after learning the result. … However, when they got out of the arena, they were immediately surrounded by a host of journalists bombarding them with such sharp questions as 'Miss X, what do you think of your losing the gold medal this time since our government has invested so much to hire a French coach for you, who has always thought highly of you and expects you to succeed? Do you think you have lived up to the expectations of your coach and your team?'*" (OI). Na found such kind of questions very "*cruel*", because "*obviously she had tried her best and she was already heart-broken*", but those journalists ignored the athlete's sadness and continued to hurt her by raising "*harsh*" questions so as to produce breaking news (OI). Therefore, when she later interviewed an international female athlete, who told her "*a lot of personal details*", Na

left out most of the details in her news report because she valued "*humanistic care*" more than "*news value*" (OI).

Later on in Year 4, Na gave up the opportunity of pursuing a Master's degree in literature exempted from entrance exams. Instead, she decided to take the exam for enrolment into a graduate school specializing in interpretation. When explaining her choice, she said, literature was "*too romantic*" while interpretation was "*very practical*" (I7). Perhaps the Olympic Games experience exerted some influence on her so that despite her love for "romantic" literature, she was more interested in intercultural communication in real contexts.

### 2. National identity: A critical yet passionate Chinese

While broadening her knowledge and improving her English skills, Na also became more culturally critical. In Year 3, she showed a high opinion of "*humanism and pursuit of freedom in Western cultures*" and a strong dislike of "*Chinese people's obsession for hierarchy*" (I5). However, she also found certain aspects in Western cultures repulsive, like the "*decadentism*" and "*pessimism*" in movies such as *Train Spotting,* which describes the empty and decadent life of a group of drug addicts. "*Can the society really be that decadent? Impossible. So I think they are just being cynical, but they have gone too far*" (I5). In her opinion, her English-learning did not weaken her Chinese identity. "*In fact, through comparison, I have had a better understanding of many aspects of my Chinese identity*" (I5).

Na's volunteer experience in the Olympic Games strengthened her Chinese national identity. For example, while working at the competition site one day, she learned that Luan Jujie, a Canadian fencer who had a Chinese origin and used to fence for China, waved a banner saying "Hello, My Homeland" in Chinese after her competition. Tears immediately welled up in Na's eyes; she was moved that after many years, Luan "*is still a Chinese and still has China in her heart*". Later, Na found an opportunity to pass on her mother's good wishes to Luan in person, to which Luan returned verbal thanks. This made Na feel further connected to her: "*since Luan misses Chinese people, Chinese people miss her too*" (OG). Na could not help shedding tears again while reporting this experience in her interview.

### 3. Summary

Na struggled to become an accepted and acknowledged member among English-major students in a top-tier foreign language university. At the beginning, her English use was predominantly among Chinese nationals, with her teachers and fellow students, centered around courses of English language skills and Inner Circle literature. Na's participation in this CoP did not lead her to integrate into a particular NS culture. In addition to solid language skill learning, it served to

broaden her mind and heart, to be more open to various cultures and probe deeper into her Chinese identity.

This budding interculturalism was strengthened by Na's volunteer experience during the Beijing Olympics, where she had substantial opportunities to work in ELF with participants from various parts of the globe. Her "productive bilingualism" orientation (Gao, 2000), i.e., mutual enhancement of L1 and L2, and of global and national identities, were reflected and constructed in her interaction with international and Chinese athletes, and subsequent writing practices. Towards graduation, her interculturalist identity was further explored, e.g., in her attempt to pursue an MA in interpretation, and in trial writing of a bilingual play with the dialogical meeting of two protagonists representing two cultures. Thus the meaning of her "marriage to English" expanded (I1), from English as a "major" in university, to English as a global perspective.

*Wen Yan's story*

Wen Yan was an English major, but what she really liked was economics. In an environment not directly accommodating her interest but providing some free space, she explored her position: focusing on economics while using English as an instrument. Through ranked degrees of participation (and non-participation) in ordered CoPs, she took substantial steps towards her global identity of a future international business woman.

*1. Global identity: International business woman*
*Business club participant.* Yan had dreamed of studying at the School of Economics and Management in a top-ranking comprehensive university upon high school graduation, but did not succeed with her actual scores in the university entrance examination. Knowing that she would major in English, Yan felt disappointed. "*I'd never expected I'd study English as my major at college. English is just a tool of communication, a basic skill of my future professional life. It's not worth devoting all my life*" (J1). One of her solutions was to take economics as her second major from the sophomore year. In this way she could match English *"the soy sauce"* with economics the *"food"* (I2).

As another way out, in the second sophomore semester Yan joined AIESEC (Association Internationale des Etudiantsen Sciences Economiques et Commerciales), an international student organization aiming at providing opportunities of social practice in business. In this CoP she felt excited and her English skills challenged: "*In the association when people learned I'm from the English Department, they gave me all those tasks requiring English skills. In fact my English is not as good as they expected. That's actually quite embarrassing*" (I4). Yan

benefited from such challenges: "*I find my vision is greatly expanded, and that really makes me feel good. After all, this is a comprehensive university, and you will have the opportunity to work with students majoring in natural sciences. This will help to overcome some shortcomings of liberal arts students*" (I4). In the first semester of Year 3, Yan was elected an AIESEC leader. While increasing her investment in this student club, she reduced investment in the learning of English courses. In a blog posting she said: "*I skipped almost all the* (English) *classes for the week, working for the AIESEC Cultural Night, info-session, interview training, and of course, socializing over meal tables. Feeling that I'm sold to AIESEC. Yet working in this community I had the feeling of intimacy and fulfillment. Everybody was crazy working and playing. I enjoy every single step during this process*" (W5).

*Interpreter for a business trip.* During the first semester of Year 3, Yan went for a short trip to Canada, as an interpreter for a government delegation concerning price investigation. With this first experience abroad, she felt her horizon was broadened, and her communication skills strengthened: "*Members of the delegation were mostly senior government officials … How I could help them and foreigners communicate smoothly, this was quite a challenge for me as a person and for my interpersonal communication skills. I've gained a lot from this experience*" (I5). Yan did not ask for leave from the English Department; she told course instructors about the trip only after she returned, looking not guilty but excited. At the request of an instructor teaching Intercultural Communication, she made an oral report about her trip in the class (O5).

*Business article writer.* In Year 3, Yan's investment in economics produced impressive achievement. With her mother's encouragement, she wrote a research article regarding price, and submitted it to a core Chinese journal of economics, which was soon accepted and published, quite out of her expectation. For that reason, she gained a prize from her university. For an undergraduate, such publication was quite rare. It reified Yan's position in the economics community as a legitimate peripheral participant, and boosted her confidence and interest in further participation in this circle: "*I feel that my competence of tacit understanding in this area is much higher than in English*" (I5).

For her graduation thesis, Yan chose a topic on the impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s on the U.S. presidential election. "*I like to gain knowledge in this respect. Learning about the political culture of the US and its social and cultural situations may help me in communication with foreigners in future, and it is indispensable for my future*" (I8). Amidst the mainstream graduation thesis topics on British and American literature, her economics-related topic was accepted by the English Department. This was very meaningful for Yan, as it helped to integrate her identities in two different majors. In the first semester of Year 4, Yan successfully obtained eligibility for an MA program in finance and business management

at a business school. She felt settled. Now she could maintain a non-central position in her English major, and fully embrace a future in finance with strengths of English proficiency. Her identifications with two different majors were somewhat reconciled.

*2. National identity: "I am sandwiched between two sides"*

Although claiming she was an alien in the School of Foreign Languages, Yan felt she received increasing influence from Western cultures, particularly through watching American TV series. "*I am strongly influenced by American TV series, particularly by their values. I am fitted to an environment of competition*" (I6). When asked about characters that had greatest impact on her, she responded: "*The most influential character is perhaps Doctor Grey.*[4] *...You may say he had little sense of shame in competition and would do anything and everything to achieve his aim..., but now I may say I quite appreciate his style of doing things. ... In their culture competition is important, whereas in China we put more emphasis on harmony. ... I didn't have a clear sense of their value before, but now I think things should be done that way, that is, one should pursue the best position in a competition. You are already playing this game, so there is no reason why you shouldn't play better*" (I6).

Yet to some extent, Yan went beyond the simple oppositional perspective of culture. She was able to adopt a more pluralistic, open vision for cultures: "*Chinese people and foreigners do not differ that much*" (I5). "*After learning English, perhaps I can look at myself from a more objective stance. I am sandwiched between two sides, on the one hand, I'm an English major; on the other hand, my parents were scholars of the Chinese language, and they praise highly the Chinese culture. Sometimes when I hear them saying this or that (of Chinese culture) is good, I will express my different views from an English perspective. These are two different systems with respective strength.*" (I5).

*3. Summary*

In the comprehensive university where Yan studied, English and Economics programs were two distinct CoPs. The former was expected to produce scholars of the English language and literature, whereas the latter was related with future business managers, financial clerks or bankers. Yan's admission to the English Department was a passively accepted choice. However, through her exploration, struggle, and negotiation, it became her active choice to a large extent, i.e., using English skills as an instrumental strength to achieve her career dream in economics. To realize this goal, she minimized her investment in the English CoP, maintaining a rather marginal position but with ample free space, and maximized investment in the

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4. Grey's Anatomy.

business student club and her second major of economics, emphasizing them over her first major. Through ranked participation in various CoPs, she moved forward towards her imagined identity as an international business woman.

Yan claimed a *"sandwiched"* identity, showing a dichotomy between entities of "Chinese" and "Western" cultures, though she paradoxically denied this opposition. In her meaning system, taking *"an English perspective"* was related to competitive values of the West (to be specific, the US), which were embedded in the world of global business; contrasted with it was the Chinese traditional value emphasizing interpersonal and social harmony. Although we lacked data showing direct links between Yan's values and her actual ELF use in communication, such cultural value struggles raise further questions for ELF and identity research.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study had three research questions. Being aware that we relied quite heavily on self-report, we try to answer these questions based on analysis of available data.

The participants constructed multiple and varied ELF-associated global identities, which were often intertwined with identities in their selected CoPs or ICs. For Jie and Yan, global identities were embedded in their *imagined professional identities*, as an IT expert or business woman respectively. Jingming's global identity was composed of *lovers of various pop cultures*. Na imagined herself as an *interculturalist* enhancing intercultural communication, yet this was developed from her identity as an English-major student in a foreign language university in China. These ELF-associated identities were embedded in membership in selected CoPs and ICs. In other words, CoPs and ICs served to mediate between the individual and the larger scale "global" identities.

The ELF-associated local identities in this study were less varied, predominantly centered on the *Chinese national*, which was dialogically related with the "global" in one way or another. Sometimes the "Chinese" was oppositional to "the West", readily aroused and enacted in international political debates or conflicts. Through ELF experiences in CoPs such as online forums, the national identity was defended and strengthened. Sometimes the "Chinese" was simultaneously developed and mutually enhanced with the "global," as with Na during and after the Beijing Olympics. In light of a global positioning, the national was expressed, reflected upon, and deepened. This result was consistent with previous findings regarding the positive connection between global and national identities (Erling, 2007; Gao, 2010). Yet there were no sufficient data in this study to show a necessary relation between the national identity and a local English variety.

Individual agencies were exercised in multiple ways. First, participants chose various CoPs and ICs and varied degrees of investment in them, leading to their imagined identities. For some participants, e.g., Jie and Yan, there was a clear path and direct connection between their chosen CoPs and ICs of future career. The agency was predominantly seen in their choices of the goals and paths. Second, sometimes agency meant going against contextual pressures, struggling with mainstream forces and navigating within given spaces, or negotiating for larger spaces (e.g., in Yan's ranked investment). Third, sometimes the agency regarding "goals" was less explicit, yet it was revealed in the participants' openness to new experiences, reflective sense-making, or imaginative creation (e.g., Na's bilingual play).

There are two further points to be noted. The first concerns the characteristics of ELF CoPs. The participants' chosen CoPs are not all the classic kind, with intense face-to-face engagement and a joint enterprise. The connections may be quite loose, as among students and teachers in a given department. In case of virtual communities such as Internet forums, members do not meet in person; their intensity of interaction varied. The second concerns the characteristics of ELF practices in CoPs. Although the ELF movement denies the centrality of NSs, the reality of individual ELF users is complex. With our participants, on the one hand, American and British influences were explicit or implicit in ELF practices, not only in model linguistic varieties, movies and songs, but also in scientific competitions, publications, and internship work in business companies. It was not uncommon that they associated the English language with "the Western culture", which could well be an IC. On the other hand, the participants did not simply parrot NS practices or conform to their beliefs. They were instead often engaged in dialogues with those practices and beliefs. While verifying the relevance of identity construction in ELF and revealing its varied facets, this study also raises issues concerning gaps and complexities which may be further explored in future research.

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