Digital empowerment for rural migrant students in China: Identity, investment, and digital literacies beyond the classroom

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Abstract

Drawing upon Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, this article examines how Xing and Jimmy (both pseudonyms) as two male Chinese English as a foreign language learners from rural migrant backgrounds negotiate their identities and assemble their social and cultural resources to *invest* in autonomous digital literacies for language learning and the assertion of a legitimate place in urban spaces. Employing a connective ethnographic design, this study collected data through interviews, reflexive journals, digital artifacts, and on-campus observations. Data were analyzed using an inductive thematic approach as well as within- and cross-case data analysis methods. The findings indicate that Xing and Jimmy experienced a profound sense of alienation and exclusion as they migrated from under-resourced rural spaces to the urban elite field. The unequal power relations in urban classrooms subjected them to marginalized and inadequate rural identities by denying them the right to speak and be heard. However, engaging with digital literacies in the wild allowed these migrant learners to access a wide range of linguistic, cultural, and symbolic resources, empowering them to reframe their identities as legitimate English speakers. The acquisition of such legitimacy enabled them to challenge the prevailing rural–urban exclusionary ideologies to claim the right to speak. This article closes by offering implications for empowering rural migrant students as socially competent members of the Chinese higher education system in the digital age.

Keywords: rural migrant students; identity; investment; digital literacies; digital empowerment

1. Introduction

With people of different ethnicities and languages crossing borders to pursue improved living conditions, mass migration has been a world phenomenon and an integral part of human history in the age of globalization (Darvin & Norton, 2016). While transnational migration happens frequently across the world, such as Middle Eastern refugees moving to Sweden (Bradley & Al-Sabbagh, 2022), there is also mass domestic migration in certain countries. In China, every year there are hundreds of millions of rural workers flocking to the eastern metropolises (e.g. Shanghai) to seek jobs and make their living as cheap labor owing to rapid urbanization. As the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2021) reports, the number of rural citizens accounts for 36.11% (around 510 million) of the total 1.4 billion population. Of approximately 510 million rural people, 170 million are a floating population who turn into rural migrant workers. With an increasingly growing number of rural migrants bringing their families to the cities, their children

are experiencing the social and educational inequalities caused and reproduced by the rural *hukou* (Afridi, Li & Ren, 2015). As a unique household registration system in China, *hukou* has been functioning as a systemic pattern of control that categorizes Chinese citizens into rural and non-rural residents, depriving rural people of "many rights and privileges enjoyed by their urban counterparts such as access to quality education, housing and healthcare" (Li, 2013: 829). The purpose of this article is to draw attention to how Chinese domestic migrant students with rural *hukou* negotiate their unequal educational and social resources to learn English and assert a legitimate place in the urban university context.

As technology has been embedded into secondary and tertiary education in China (Wu, 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2024), rural migrant students are now facing an alarming digital divide between themselves and their urbanite counterparts that involves *not only* dissimilar access to digital technologies or perceptions of technological affordances *but also* the contrasting impacts of unequal digital practices on individuals' offline knowledge acquisition and language learning (Darvin, 2018; Liu, 2023b; Ragnedda, 2017). Given that technology can catalyze educational inequality and simultaneously serve as "a source of empowerment and an instrument for inequality at the individual and societal levels" (Ortega, 2017: 300), this study is particularly interested in how Chinese university English as a foreign language (EFL) learners from rural migrant backgrounds negotiate their identities and assemble their different resources to *invest* in autonomous digital literacies for language learning purposes. It also focuses on the critical implications of the digital literacies that Chinese rural migrant students have deployed by dissecting how they agentively negotiate power to navigate unequal ideological structures to "claim the right to speak" across time and space (Norton, 2013: 179). The key research question it aims to address is as follows:

> **RQ:** In what ways do EFL learners from rural migrant backgrounds invest in digital literacies for language learning and claiming the right to speak?

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining digital literacies

In a digitalized world where "speech and writing have converged, collapsing the boundaries of language, literacy, and multimodality" (Darvin & Hafner, 2022: 867), the notion of digital literacies has gained momentum as it seeks to unpack how learners negotiate technological affordances and constraints to accomplish specific social purposes (Darvin & Hafner, 2022; Jones, 2021; Jones & Hafner, 2021; Liu, 2022). Understood as "the practices of communicating, relating, thinking and being associated with digital media" (Jones & Hafner, 2021: 12), a sociocultural view of digital literacies does not center around learners' competence to use digital technologies. Rather, it focuses on how learners assemble their linguistic and semiotic resources to engage in social practice, perform multiple identities, and construct new ways of relating to others in a world mediated by digital technologies.

As digital literacies are tied up with the interrogation of power, ideology, and issues of inequality, one recurring theme in understanding digital literacies is what constitutes the criticality of a digitally literate person. Empirical studies have revealed the importance of critical language/media awareness that empowers learners to recognize how power programmed in platform design may afford or constrain online behaviors and social interactions of different kinds (Darvin, 2023; Darvin & Hafner, 2022; Jones & Hafner, 2021; Tagg & Seargeant, 2021). Jones (2021), for example, drew upon data from a two-year participatory project and examined how linguistic and non-linguistic forms were coded in the online algorithmic design to manipulate the ways university students in Hong Kong and the United States engaged in online communication and inference-making practices. This study suggested that while digital texts/technologies seem to be neutral and

unbiased, the hidden ideologies embedded in algorithms or sociotechnical design can shape how information is given and knowledge is produced online. Notably, recognizing that technology presents opportunities for social change and equitable communications, there is also a growing body of literature that examines how texts, through the affordances of digital tools, can be redesigned and consumed to serve the interests of all learners by subverting exclusionary ideologies and negotiating inequitable power relationships (Ávila & Pandya, 2013; Garcia, Fernández & Okonkwo, 2020). These studies also emphasize that how learners are ushered into different digital spaces to participate in diverse digital practices is *critical* (Garcia *et al.*, 2020; Liu, 2023a).

The present study integrates the sociocultural and critical view of digital literacies by defining it as the wide range of technology-mediated social practices that language learners enact by negotiating and assembling their linguistic, semiotic, and technical resources in a power-loaded world. It highlights that digital literacies not only involve reading and writing associated with digital media but also draw attention to how these practices bring learners to new ways of doing, meaning, being, thinking, and relating. To thrive in digital spaces as literate people, learners need to not only realize the sociotechnical structure of online platforms (Darvin, 2023) but also develop a critical stance that empowers them to interrogate, challenge, and resist how digital tools are designed and used for knowledge acquisition and the pursuit of a socially just future (Ávila & Pandya, 2013; Garcia *et al.*, 2020; Liu & Darvin, 2024).

2.2. Digital literacies of migrant language learners

Recognizing how the competence to engage with digital tools and navigate online spaces has become essential for migrants to fully participate in society, research on the digital literacies of migrant language learners has revealed that digital literacies can serve as a vital bridge to their successful integration into the host country by helping them address the challenges of adjusting to a new culture, language, and way of life (Bradley & Al-Sabbagh, 2022; Darvin, 2018; Liu, Li & Zhang, 2022; McLean, 2010). Studies have found that while digital literacies as social practices can be developed through structured classroom activities such as digital storytelling (Kendrick, Early, Michalovich & Mangat, 2022), they can also be fostered through autonomous digital practices beyond the classroom or in "the digital wilds" (Sauro & Zourou, 2019).

Digital wilds refer to the non-instructional and naturalistic online contexts where learners can exert their agency and autonomy to engage in interest-driven and self-directed literacy and communication practices with people from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Sauro & Zourou, 2019). A growing body of literature has revealed that engaging learners from migrant backgrounds with the digital wilds enables them to expand identity repertoires (Liu & Darvin, 2024), increase target language proficiency and confidence (Han & Reinhardt, 2022), and acquire knowledge of the target language and culture (Liu, 2023b; Liu, Ma, Bao & Liu, 2023; McLean, 2010). For example, the case study of McLean (2010) traced the digital literacies of a Caribbean immigrant adolescent in the United States. The findings indicated that the adolescent's active participation in the digital wilds by reading and writing on different social networking sites not only contributed to her improved English proficiency but also enabled her to construct legitimate identities across "native and adopted homes" (McLean, 2010: 14). Bradley and Al-Sabbagh (2022) directed attention to newly arrived Middle Eastern migrants in Sweden and how they utilized mobile phones to engage in digital literacies for language learning purposes. The study showed that the participants failed to attend self-directed digital learning practices with mobile technology due largely to the disconnect between their learning needs and the limited design of mobile learning apps. However, Bradley and Al-Sabbagh (2022) highlighted that engaging in particular digital literacies (e.g. more smart and individualized digital gaming) holds the potential to enhance migrant students' motivation and performance in learning the target language. These studies suggest that engaging learners from migrant backgrounds with digital

literacies in the wild may be an effective approach to supporting their language learning and identity development in the receiving society.

The following section draws attention to the rural–urban divide in China and the unique realities lived by the rural migrant students in the present study.

2.3. English language learning and rural–urban divide in China

With geopolitical histories of exclusion and disenfranchisement being unveiled by the Global South perspective in applied linguistics (Pennycook & Makoni, 2019), recent research has started to examine issues of inequalities in second language (L2) education within nation-states. In the Chinese EFL context, attention has been directed to how university EFL learners from rural China negotiate the rural–urban differences to participate in English language/literacy learning in unequal ways (Li, 2013; Liu, 2023b; Liu & Darvin, 2024; Wu & Tarc, 2024). For instance, applying Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field, Wu and Tarc (2024) investigated how the lack of legitimate capital (e.g. intercultural experiences and competence) in the urban university context has caused rural learners' sense of inadequacy and maladaptation to university EFL classrooms. They also emphasized that the class-shaped habitus resulting from rural students' past living conditions often leads to their narrow, test-focused disposition towards language learning in the urban institutional field. Focusing on the digital literacies of two university students from rural lower-class backgrounds, Liu (2023b) drew upon Bourdieu's theory of practice and further extended this discussion. His study found that whereas habitus can structure rural lower-class students' technology use and direct them into recreational digital practices (e.g. online gaming or TikTok browsing), it does not play a deterministic role. Rural learners who recognize technological affordances may agentively develop creative digital practices and accumulate legitimate capital online to assert their legitimate place in the urban context.

In the present research, differentiated from university students from rural China mentioned above, the target group – rural migrant students – lives in more complex realities due to the history of migrating across regions with their families and receiving elementary or secondary education both in rural and urban areas. Such complicated educational trajectories may lead to their assumption of a more prominent "rural migrant identity" and the marginal and inferior status in the urban field by intensifying their feeling of the urban–rural differences before college (Li, 2013).

3. Theoretical framework

This article builds upon the theory of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995) to critically examine the relationship between language, literacy, and power. Often conceptualized as a sociological complement to motivation, investment acknowledges that L2 learners may be highly motivated, but they may not be able to be invested in learning the target language if the power relationships within their speech communities/learning contexts circumscribe their right to speak (Norton Peirce, 1995).

In response to the new world order wrought by globalization, mass migration, and accelerated mobility, Darvin and Norton (2015) anchor investment to the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology (Figure 1). Inspired by a poststructuralist view that collapses the traditional dichotomies associated with identities (e.g. good/bad, motivated/unmotivated), they see identity as multiple, fluid, and a site of struggle. Identity relates to how learners understand their socially constructed relationships with the world, and how such relationships shift across time and space in a way that shapes their desire for the future (Norton, 2013). Capital, based on Bourdieu's (1984, 1991) sociological work, refers to power in different forms. Language learners can negotiate their economic, cultural, and social capital, which clarifies questions of "what they have," "what they know," and "who they know," respectively. When these different forms of capital are recognized as legitimate by those in power, they can be converted into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991).
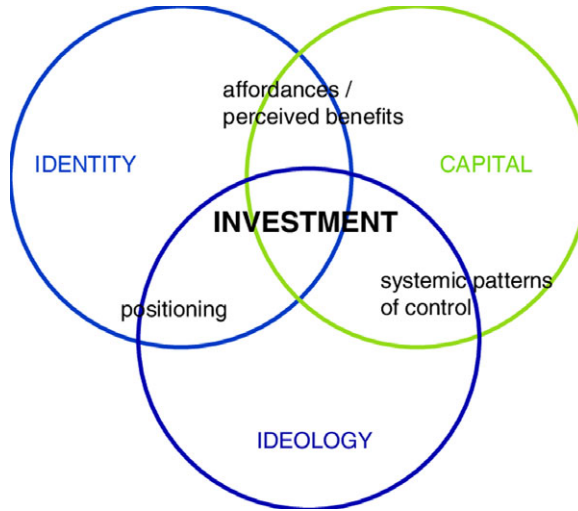
Figure 1. Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment.

Drawing attention to how the mechanism of power operates invisibly to shape L2 learning behaviors and the assumption of different identities, ideology is understood as the "dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion" (Darvin & Norton, 2015: 44). When language learners move fluidly across online and offline spaces, the colluding or competing *ideologies* in these spaces can frame their *identities* as legitimate or illegitimate by valuing or devaluing the amount of *capital* they possess or can negotiate (Darvin & Norton, 2023; Liu & Darvin, 2024; Liu & Liu, 2023). Investment in language learning occurs through such a dynamic and nonlinear process where identity, capital, and ideology intersect with each other.

In the context of rural migrant students' language learning, their investment in English learning serves as an important part of how they claim the right to speak across time and space. Specifically, when migrant students engage in diverse digital literacies beyond the classroom, they gain access to legitimate capital, such as knowledge about the target language and online intercultural experiences. Simultaneously, they benefit from a broader range of identity options that transcend the marginalized rural migrant identity they performed in the offline university setting. As they agentively negotiate a greater amount of capital and powerful identities, they are able to navigate unequal relations of power with ease and legitimacy (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013). Such a nonlinear process brings about possibilities of digital self-empowerment, which refers to the process through which rural migrant students negotiate technological affordances to assert their agency and acquire a wider range of capital and identity options in the digital wilds and how the acquisition of legitimate capital enables them to challenge unequal power structures. In this article, I argue that investing in digital literacies for self-empowerment is essentially about how students navigate power-loaded learning realities to construct legitimate identities as language learners and claim the right to speak across space (Liu & Darvin, 2024).

4. Method

4.1. A case-based connective ethnography

This article utilizes data from a six-month case-based *connective* ethnography examining how Chinese university students negotiate their differential access to material and cultural resources to enact digital practices for diverse social purposes including English language learning. It is case-

based because it focuses on extending the understanding of personal and particularized experiences, rather than aiming to generate generalizable findings applicable to larger populations (Duff, 2018). This study also draws upon connective ethnography that collapses the binaries between online/virtual and offline/physical in New Literacy Studies (Leander, 2008). It highlights that while our learners move fluidly and flexibly from and to different social spaces shaped by ubiquitous digital technologies, they are in effect occupying these spaces simultaneously or navigating online and offline worlds as an entirety rather than separate fields (Darvin, 2023).

4.2. Xing and Jimmy

Xing and Jimmy (both pseudonyms) were rural migrant students from Z University in Z city, a highly developed metropolis in central China. As one of the well-reputed universities in China, more than 90% of enrolled students at Z University come from urban middle-class backgrounds. Xing was a third-year undergraduate enrolled in the English translation program, while Jimmy was a fourth-year student majoring in communication engineering. They have been friends for more than two years due to shared interests and active participation in the undergraduate English society featuring weekly English-speaking activities open to all registered students. I got to know Xing and Jimmy in one of the weekly English corner activities in 2021. At that time, the English society organizers introduced me to the two students. Through several rounds of online informal exchanges with Xing and Jimmy, I learned how they experienced identity struggles as rural migrant students in the urban space and how they saw technology use as a way of acquiring knowledge and power outside of the classroom. Recognizing such a research niche, I invited Xing and Jimmy to participate in the present investigation with informed consent.

4.3. Data collection

Data collection methods employed in this study include semi-structured interviews, digital artifacts, reflexive journals, and on-campus observation. The interview protocol was generated based on prior ethnographic studies on digital literacies of language learners from diverse social backgrounds (Darvin, 2018; Liu, 2023b). The interviews were conducted in three sessions using Putonghua. In the interviews, Xing and Jimmy were encouraged to provide details about their family backgrounds, individual educational and English learning trajectories, rural identity reflection, and daily digital practices. Notably, the second session of the interview focuses on their specific online communication and literacy practices based on digital artifacts, such as screenshots of the apps and websites that participants often visit, and the online videos they composed.

To triangulate data sources, Xing and Jimmy were requested to provide three reflexive journals respectively, in the form of autobiographical narratives, to elaborate on their English language learning experiences and identity changes across time and space. The reflexive journals also entail their critical reflections on the extent to which the ability to gain knowledge online matters in their negotiation of power. Between April 2022 and May 2022, I had the opportunity to enter the campus of Z University and conducted a two-day on-campus observation with Xing and Jimmy. Such an experience enabled me to acquire an accurate understanding of how Xing and Jimmy learned English and used digital technologies in real-life settings (e.g. classrooms, dormitories, and student society) by not only observing their digital practices but also communicating with their friends, roommates, and teachers.

4.4. Data analysis

Using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021), within-case and cross-case analysis methods (Duff, 2018), I interpreted the data in five steps. First, I started with interview transcription and the enhancement of my familiarity with the raw data by reading the transcripts

multiple times. Second, all textual data, including the interviews, observation field notes, and reflexive journals, were coded inductively to map out initial codes and their corresponding descriptors using NVivo 12. Third, the codes were compared constantly to locate their links and formulate the larger categories or themes (e.g. negotiating capital in the digital wilds). During this process, digital artifacts were annotated and linked to the emergent themes as complementary examples. Then the themes were re-examined to identify more stable patterns that helped to address the research question. In the fourth step, based on the established thematic codes, I wrote two case reports demonstrating Xing's and Jimmy's literacy practices and identity shifts when moving across online and offline spaces. Then a cross-case analysis was undertaken by comparing the two case narratives to elicit in-depth thematic discussion. Finally, the two case reports were shared with Xing and Jimmy for member checking to improve the credibility and accuracy of my interpretations.

5. Findings

5.1. The case of Xing

Xing hails from a traditionally marginalized and less developed rural township in Henan province, a typical source place of rural migrant labor in China's metropolises. In 2010, Xing's parents moved to Z city (350 km away from their hometown). As low-skilled rural laborers, they have been working in a suburban waste recycling center, making a living by recycling unwanted goods such as clothes, bottles, and carton boxes. Being brought to the city in 2012 to reunite with his parents, Xing received his middle school and high school education in Z city, but he went back to Henan to attend the *gaokao* (national college entrance examination) due to the constraints of his rural *hukou*.

5.1.1. Rural–urban migration and the initial marginalized status in urban spaces

After relocating to the city at 13, Xing developed a strong sense of alienation and the feeling of strangeness. He highlighted his emotional struggles when just starting his secondary education as a rural migrant student in the city:

> At first, I was stoked. But then, it was like stepping into a whole new world that was modern and crowded, and I didn't know anyone except for my parents. I felt like a fish out of water, clueless about city life and how to act all urban. (Interview I)

The migration from rural to urban spaces led to not only Xing's sense of disorientation but also the cultural gap between himself and the urban environment, which is reminiscent of Bourdieu's (1984) emphasis on how "habitus dislocation," the mismatch between individuals' original habitus and a new field, shapes one's sense of alienation across space. The habitus dislocation in Xing's case arose out of the mismatch between their rural habitus and the urban milieu as well as rural migrant students' limited access to legitimate capital (e.g. knowledge about urban lifestyles) in the urban place. Notably, although Xing has lived and studied in the city for years since secondary school, his sense of alienation and maladaptation to the urban place was further intensified and reinforced after entering the elite environment of Z University. In his words,

> In my major, I was one of the rare folks who hailed from a rural background. A lot of my classmates had been abroad or had all these cool cross-cultural adventures before college, while I didn't have all those fancy experiences ... On top of that, the teachers didn't give much attention to students like me in class because they believed rural students were terrible at English, though my English communication skills were indeed below standard. So, I wasn't about to embarrass myself by speaking English in front of everyone. (Interview I)

The interview excerpt suggests how Xing's strong sense of inferiority stemming from being part of the rural student minority induced his silence in the English classroom and his inability to invest in classroom English learning practices. Although he majored in English translation, he did not possess a good command of English speaking and listening as legitimate capital in the urban classroom. Furthermore, while he seems to be motivated, the classroom's ideological beliefs (e.g. preconceived bias towards rural students' English competence) deprived him of the right to speak, leading him to believe that it was embarrassing to speak English in the classroom. As such, Xing was positioned by others and also self-positioned as an incompetent English learner throughout his year-one studies.

5.1.2. Investing in digital literacies in the wild

Despite the setbacks in the English classroom, Xing agentively mobilized his limited social and cultural capital to make a change. For example, he received substantial support from his family by seeking emotional comfort and pouring out negative feelings. To overcome his fear of speaking English, he sought advice from his senior fellow students who could speak English confidently. As Xing shared in the interview,

> I received many valuable English learning suggestions from an upperclassman who is also from Henan province and is leading our undergraduate English society. He used to struggle with his spoken English, but through self-study online, he has become very confident now. With his help, I gradually started to know how important it is to learn English online and feel that English speaking was not such a terrifying thing. (Interview II)

One can see in this excerpt how Xing managed to negotiate his restricted social capital to improve his English speaking in the urban elite environment by seeking the help of capable others who shared the same socio-geographical root (i.e. from the same province) and could speak English properly. By doing so, Xing was gradually able to recognize that digital technologies could be used not only for recreational purposes (e.g. online gaming) but also for accessing opportunities for creative and effective English language learning. Thus, he downloaded several free-access language learning or related mobile applications (e.g. *baicizhan*,[1] *kekenet*,[2] and *China Daily*[3]) and devoted more than 50 hours per week to learning English in these digital spaces, which laid the foundation for his subsequent attempts to learn English productively in the digital wilds.

Using a virtual private network[4] (VPN), Xing could negotiate more authentic English learning resources by engaging with the wider transcultural digital world where English is used as a lingua franca. While traversing across multifarious online spaces on YouTube, Facebook, and other social media platforms, Xing not only acquired knowledge about the English language and culture but also benefited from a wide range of identity options. For instance, he was able to negotiate his identity as a competent intercultural communicator by signing up on OmeTV[5] and having random video chats with other English speakers all over the world (see Figure 2). On YouTube, Xing was particularly interested in watching English music videos such as those of the Rolling Stones due to the influence of his high school English teachers who often played old-school rock 'n' roll music cassettes in class. By browsing the YouTube commenting areas and interacting with other fans (see Figure 3), Xing was able to assert his identity as a Rolling Stones fan who could listen, read, and interact in English. Such expanded identity repertoires empowered Xing to resist

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[1]A popular English vocabulary learning application in mainland China.

[2]One of the largest online English listening and speaking learning websites in mainland China.

[3]A state-owned online magazine that shares fresh voices from China in English.

[4]VPN enables Chinese internet users to get around the Great Firewall and access Western websites and social media platforms such as YouTube and Google.

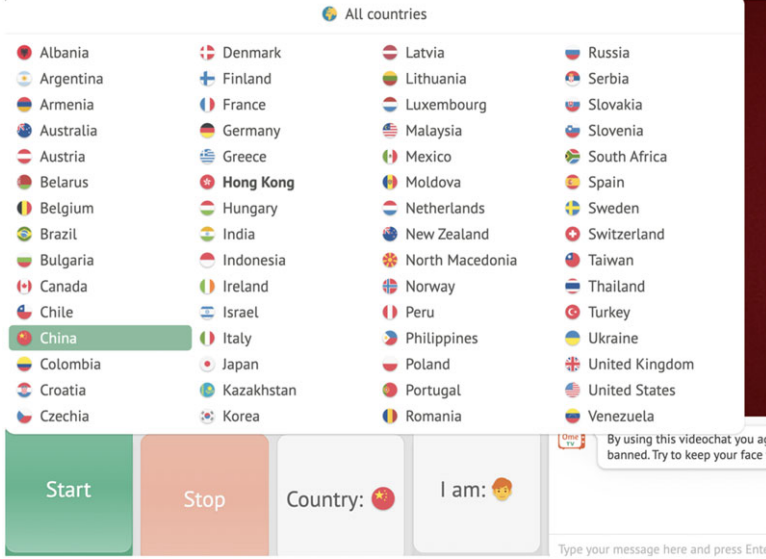[5]A online platform that enables users to make friends and network in the form of video chats.

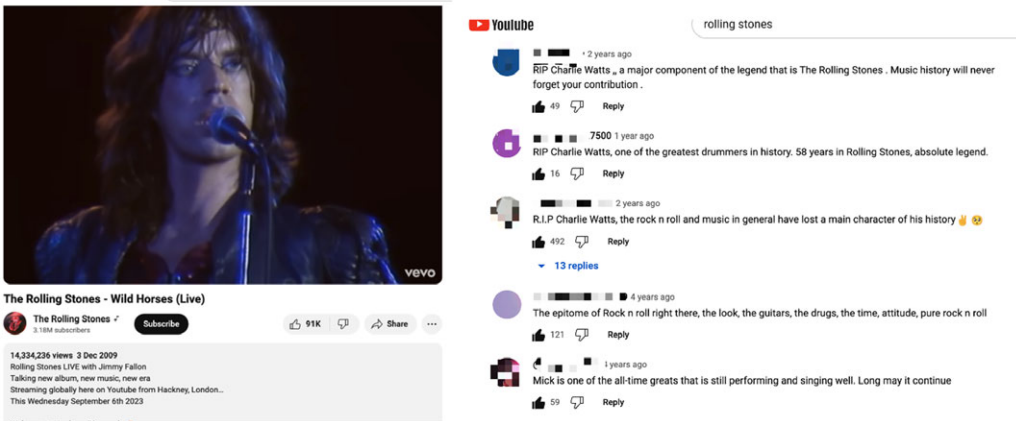**Figure 2.** The interface of OmeTV.

Figure 3. Screenshots of YouTube (*left*, music video of the Rolling Stones; *right*, the commenting area).

his marginalized English language learner identity by granting him the right to speak in the digital wilds. As Xing indicated, "I didn't mean my English is very good, but I can indeed use English bravely on the internet without having to worry about losing face in the offline classroom" (Interview III).

5.1.3. Navigating ideological spaces to claim the right to speak

The prolonged engagement in the digital wilds empowered Xing to not only enact multiple English-mediated identities online but also negotiate capital (e.g. intercultural communication experience and improved English proficiency) valued in the offline classroom. With the increased volume of legitimate capital, Xing was allowed to re-examine his relations with the urban place and navigate the offline ideological spaces with greater ease and confidence. For instance, Xing

recounted how he responded when being personally affronted by hidden discriminatory beliefs against rural migrant workers in the classroom:

> There was a time when my classmates talked about China's city infrastructure in one oral-English class. They called the manhole cover "大豫通宝"[6] and argued I was a user of it. Though I knew it was a joke, I didn't feel like it was right. So, I stood up and seriously explained to the oral-English teacher from Australia [who didn't know this derogatory term] that such insulting expressions should be avoided in our classroom because it's just stereotypes against rural migrant people … This would be impossible for the past "me." (Interview III)

In this excerpt, Xing demonstrated his resistance to the ideological beliefs stigmatizing students from the Henan rural migrant background. By challenging the way the derogatory term against Henan people was normalized in the communication practices of his urbanite peers, Xing was not only claiming the right to speak for people with the same background as him but also asserting his identity as an English language learner with power and legitimacy in the classroom.

5.2. The case of Jimmy

Jimmy is from a distant rural village in Anhui province, 200 km away from Z city. His parents had been running around different cities for a livelihood since his early age. His parents used to work in a small house renovation team with three relatives in the city as of 2013 when they found an alternative job in a coal mine nearby Z city. Since then, Jimmy's father has been working as a miner, while his mother has been a kitchen helper on the worksite. Jimmy was once brought by his parents to Z city and continued his secondary education in a rural migrant school for half a semester, but he had to participate in the *gaokao* in his hometown because his family is registered as the rural *hukou*. Despite not having access to quality educational resources and opportunities, Jimmy has been a high achiever throughout his educational trajectories, self-positioning as a diligent, self-disciplined, and proactive learner. These qualities figure prominently in enabling him to survive in the *gaokao* and obtain a position at Z University.

5.2.1. Rural–urban migration and the initial marginalized status in urban spaces

Jimmy's case exhibits a similar pattern to Xing's. Despite spending more than half a semester receiving secondary education in Z city, Jimmy struggled to assimilate into the urban lifestyle and had limited engagement in urban cultural practices (e.g. visiting museums). Upon commencing his undergraduate studies, he found himself marginalized and positioned as an "invisible" rural migrant student by both his teachers and peers, due largely to his rural accent. This becomes evident in his reflections during the interview:

> I could realize the huge background gap between me and my classmates. My parents are rural migrant workers, while my friends' parents are engineers and architects … They had all these opportunities to flaunt designer clothes or jet off to foreign lands, while all I could do was studying hard. It made me feel like I was inferior to my urban peers. That's why I kept to myself a lot during my first year of studies. (Interview I)

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[6]"大豫通宝" literally translates to the cash coins of the Henan people, with "大豫" referring to "the great Henan" and "通宝" meaning "cash coins used in ancient China". This term was coined by Chinese netizens as a playful yet derogatory expression, stemming from another discriminatory term "偷井盖" (the act of stealing public manhole covers). The two terms are commonly used to denigrate rural people from Henan, insinuating that Henan's rural migrant workers sustain themselves by pilfering manhole covers.

It is noteworthy that although Jimmy majored in communication engineering at a primarily Chinese-medium university, most of his professional courses were delivered in English as required by the university to enhance the future career competitiveness of students enrolled in his program. Thus, in terms of Jimmy's English learning in the classroom, he shared that

> Back then I hated English. I was terrible at speaking and listening to it since young, like I had this "dumb English" thing going on. Plus, when I spoke Mandarin or English, I had this thick rural accent from where I come from, so people would sometimes tease me. It made me never want to open my mouth in the classroom. Eventually, even the teachers didn't bother asking me questions because they assumed my English must be crap based on my accent in Mandarin, though my mastery of the professional course content was good. (Interview I)

This interview excerpt indicates how the unequal power relations in the university classroom deprived Jimmy of the right to speak by virtue of his rural migrant accent. Although he could engage with the professional course content, he was not able to invest in the classroom English learning practices because of the bias towards his rural identity as indexed by the accent he spoke with.

5.2.2. Investing in digital literacies in the wild

Unlike Xing, who acquired digital literacies through guidance and support from others, Jimmy's engagement with the digital realm was primarily self-directed and driven by personal interest. Notably, during his second year of studies, Jimmy independently saved money to buy a ThinkPad laptop, which provided him with convenient access to authentic English video resources, particularly American TV series. Among these, the immensely popular animated show *Rick and Morty* captivated Jimmy with its dark humor and philosophical undertones. Devoting considerable time to repeated viewings, he immersed himself extensively in authentic English listening materials of *Rick and Morty*.

Importantly, *Rick and Morty* served as more than entertainment for Jimmy. It also ignited his interest in multimodal literacy practices and led him into the wider digital wilds. He actively engaged with the content by creating English memes and producing a 30,000-word reflective piece enriched with colloquial slang and idiomatic expressions from the show. In addition, eager to delve deeper into the comedy and share his self-made memes with like-minded English speakers, Jimmy utilized a VPN recommended by his friends and joined different related fan communities on Facebook (see Figure 4). These online spaces provided him with opportunities for communication and interaction with English-speaking fans across the world. Over time, Jimmy forged connections and established deep friendships with similar fans from the Philippines and Costa Rica through regular Skype meetings. These online conversations extended beyond the *Rick and Morty* series, encompassing discussions about their respective cultures, traditions, and personal experiences. Interacting with these L2 English speakers not only bolstered Jimmy's confidence in using the language but also significantly improved his English communication skills. When asked why he was able to engage in fan-based literacy and communication practices using English, Jimmy emphasized the differences between the online and offline English learning environments:

> Using English online is my way of learning English. It is easier and less stressful for me because I have knowledge about Rick and Morty as a loyal fan and people don't care where you are from … This would be the other way around in the English classroom. (Interview II)
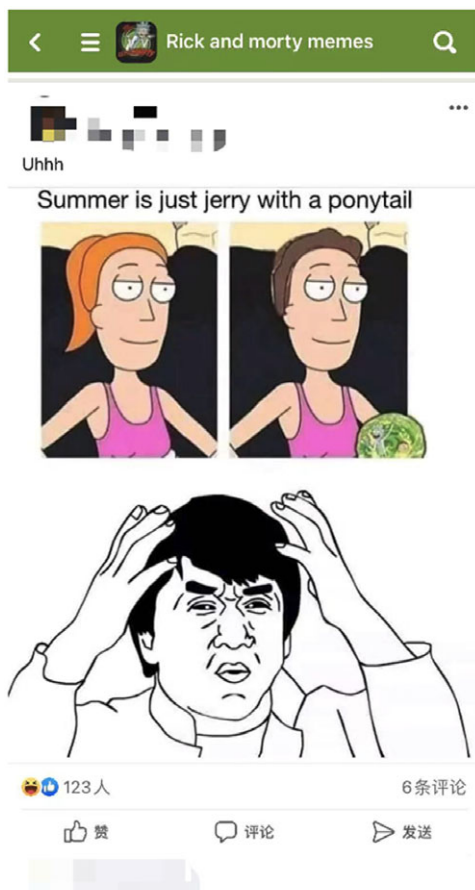
Figure 4. *Rick and Morty* fan-made meme.

Therefore, within the online transnational context, he was able to shed the label of a rural migrant learner and the accompanying feelings of inadequacy imposed by his university peers and teachers. Furthermore, by highlighting using English online as his way of learning English, Jimmy was investing in his identity as a confident speaker of English because he could assert his legitimacy as a *Rick and Morty* fan who had the power to speak.

5.2.3. Navigating ideological spaces to claim the right to speak

Jimmy, by investing in digital literacies in the wild, gradually secured a wide range of social (e.g. his transnational social network) and cultural capital (e.g. his improved English-speaking proficiency), which were perceived and recognized as legitimate in the offline university classroom. Such ability to negotiate a greater volume of legitimate capital plays a role in directing Jimmy to communication practices that challenge and resist unequal ideological bias on rural accents in the elite university context. For example, Jimmy joined the undergraduate English society and became an important part of it by assisting and leading the weekly English corner speaking activities. Drawing upon his transnational network as valued social capital, he often invited his Filipino friend and Costa Rican friends to have online chats with students at Z University, aiming to empower students with similar accent discrimination experiences like him to get rid of the complex of inferiority and shame. As he emphasized,

I wanted to let people around me realize that the world is diverse, and so should English accents. There shouldn't be any notion of standard English … Even my foreign friends speak English with their own accents, but it doesn't stop them from being confident English speakers. So as long as your English is understandable, your accent is your identity, not something to be ashamed of. (Interview III)

Jimmy's reflection indicates his resistance to the exclusionary ideologies that silenced and marginalized English language learners from rural backgrounds by virtue of the accent issue, signaling his investment in practices against accent shame. Such investment is built upon the body of capital he could negotiate through online fan-based literacy practices and the legitimate identity he could assert as a confident speaker of English in the digital wilds. In turn, by challenging accent-related ideological beliefs, Jimmy could sustainably invest in offline English language learning to maintain his legitimate status and claim the right to speak.

6. Discussion

Building on Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, this study has examined how Xing and Jimmy, two migrant students from rural China, were able to claim the right to speak in the power-loaded university context by developing creative literacy practices in the digital wilds. The findings indicate that as migrant students from under-resourced rural backgrounds, Xing and Jimmy experienced a profound sense of alienation and exclusion due to the lack of legitimate capital and "habitus dislocation" (Bourdieu, 1984) in the urban elite field. The unequal classroom power relations further subjected them to marginalized and inadequate rural identities by denying them the right to speak and be heard. However, engaging with digital literacies in the wild allowed these migrant learners to access a wide range of linguistic, cultural, and symbolic resources, empowering them to reframe their identities as legitimate English speakers and challenging the prevailing rural–urban exclusionary ideologies to claim the right to speak across space.

This study adds to the existing understanding of rural migrant learners' digital literacies in important ways. Consistent with prior research on the struggles confronted by Chinese rural students in the urban university environment (Li, 2013; Liu & Darvin, 2024; Wu & Tarc, 2024), this research demonstrates how the rural–urban differences were amplified in the classroom to shape the inadequate and marginalized positions of Xing and Jimmy as rural English language learners. As they were deprived of the right to speak in the classroom by virtue of their rural migrant identity, Xing and Jimmy found it difficult to invest in English language learning in the offline context. However, engaging with the digital wilds as empowering spaces for language learners to pursue their interests (Han & Reinhardt, 2022; Liu, 2023a; Liu, Darvin & Ma, 2024; Sauro & Zouro, 2019; Zhang & Liu, 2023) serves as a turning point because, in the transnational digital wilds, their rural identities were not discernible or important to others. Rural language learners are thus allowed to access powerful opportunities to reframe their identities as legitimate speakers of English by agentively negotiating different forms of capital. This is evident in how Xing could obtain capital and perform the identity of an intercultural communicator by having random video chats with people across the world on OmeTV and how Jimmy could assume his identity as a *Rick and Morty* fan by participating in relevant online affinity spaces on Facebook. In addition, Xing and Jimmy's engagement in various digital literacies beyond the classroom, such as Jimmy's posting of *Rick and Morty* memes on Facebook, illustrates how the accelerated mobility afforded by digital technologies and portable digital devices can offer migrant students new learning conditions and practices (Bradley & Al-Sabbagh, 2022; Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). This observation presents a promising future for leveraging mobile technologies to empower migrant students as competent language learners, enabling them to explore and express their identities while developing their language skills in creative and personally meaningful ways.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the literature by highlighting that investing in digital practices centered around pop culture or fan-based culture can be extremely beneficial to providing language learners with access to cultural and linguistic knowledge while also broadening their social circles. In this study, Xing was able to sustain his engagement with YouTube based on his passion for old-school rock music influenced by his high school teachers, while Jimmy invested in meme-making as multimodal literacy practices by capitalizing on his knowledge and interest in *Rick and Morty*. In the digital wilds, their admiration of English pop culture could be translated into English language learning efforts and practices to pave the way for the acquisition of cultural and linguistic capital online to assert their legitimacy offline. On this ground, chiming with prior research that highlights the potential of online affinity spaces for acquiring various forms of capital (Han & Reinhardt, 2022; Liu & Darvin, 2024; Sauro & Zouro, 2019), this study demonstrates how the digital wilds offer not only opportunities for English language learning and pursuing specific interests but also a means for individuals to establish their legitimacy and assert their right to be heard.

Also noteworthy is that this research contributes to understanding the criticality of the digital literacies enacted by rural migrant students in China. As critical digital literacies are always intertwined with the nexus of language and power that operates across time and space (Darvin, 2023; Liu, 2023a), this study recognizes that critical digital literacies in the Chinese university context should focus not only on how learners are ushered into diverse online spaces to negotiate power in different ways but also on the implicit impacts of online literacies on learners' navigation of the power relations embedded in offline ideologies. In this study, the criticality of the digital literacies Xing and Jimmy developed exactly lies in how they managed to negotiate capital and powerful identity options acquired online to challenge offline unequal ideological beliefs (e.g. discriminations against Henan rural migrant workers) for the pursuit of an equitable and diverse future. As such, this study expands upon the existing literature by recognizing that critical digital literacies involve not only awareness of power relations (Darvin & Hafner, 2022), recognition of contextual constraints (Jones, 2021), and a focus on action and change (Ávila & Pandya, 2013) but also and very importantly a type of agentic self-concept that grows out of the interrogation of one's learning needs/conditions and enables a hope for inequality transformation and empowerment in a digital and unequal world regardless of the social background of learners. On this ground, digital empowerment for rural migrant students entails both such agentic self-concept and a more equitable learning environment in which students are given access to negotiating cultural and social resources and challenging normative practices to assert the legitimacy of their rural migrant identities (Liu & Darvin, 2024; Xie & Reay, 2020). Based on the findings discussed earlier, I highlight that the digital wilds serve as a relatively equitable environment where the exclusionary ideologies regarding English and rural–urban differences may lose potency, which enables rural migrant students to exert their agency. By doing so, they can claim the right to speak and perform legitimate identities for self-empowerment. As such, this research underscores the importance of fostering inclusive digital spaces that allow migrant students to explore, negotiate, and assert their identities while developing their language skills, ultimately contributing to their overall sense of adjustment and academic success in the face of systemic barriers and marginalization.

This article has several implications that may facilitate the creation of enabling and empowering conditions for Chinese rural migrant students in the digital age. Given that access to the internet and portable digital devices has not been an issue in Chinese higher education environments, language teachers should recognize the pedagogical potential of the digital wilds to complement formal language instruction and encourage students with limited access to English-speaking opportunities to engage in self-initiated exploration of the digital wilds. To pedagogically explore the digital wilds in the Chinese university EFL classroom, language teachers and university administrators should also reconcile the tension between test-focused exam culture and students' interest-driven language learning practices beyond the classroom, creating a safe environment where what learners acquire through online literacy practices will be valued in the offline

classroom context. Additionally, recognizing how Xing's and Jimmy's productive digital literacies are inseparable from the way they negotiate technological affordances, language teachers ought to pay special attention to fostering students' digital dispositions that view technology use as a way of capital accumulation rather than simply entertainment. Language teachers, to this end, should develop a critical awareness of how rural migrant students' life histories and learning trajectories shape their personalized learning needs and interests (e.g. how Xing became interested in English rock music). The most important policy implication is that policymakers and university authorities should work together to help rural migrant students integrate into the urban university space as socially competent members by offering more tailored preparation courses to help students from rural China adapt to rural–urban differences.

7. Conclusion

This article draws upon data from a connective ethnography and presents how rural–urban migration can be a source of inequality in the Chinese elite university environment as well as how rural migrant students develop autonomous digital literacies for language learning and capital negotiation to claim the right to speak. This study also asserts what empowers rural migrant students to actively participate in the digital age with legitimacy and productivity, and thus it holds important implications for future practices. Although this article has these merits, some limitations should be acknowledged such as the involvement of only two participants and the lack of comparative insights from urban students. Furthermore, given that the two cases in this study come from a top-tier elite university in China, how rural migrant students face struggles and exclusion in ordinary universities or junior colleges also constitutes a critical void. This article thus calls for more future action and situated research on rural migrant students' language learning in a changing world shaped by technological innovations.

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