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Beyond Silence and Fluency: Rethinking Chinese International Students' Class Participation and Engagement in Canadian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: *This qualitative study explores how Chinese international graduate students perceive and negotiate classroom participation and engagement at a Canadian university. Drawing on the notions of investment and time inheritance, this study examines how identity, linguistic and cultural capital, ideological expectations, and temporal resources interact to shape Chinese international students' academic behavior. Sixteen graduate students from diverse faculties at a Canadian university were interviewed. Thematic analysis revealed that classroom participation and engagement are determined not only by language fluency or pedagogical familiarity but also by inherited time, neoliberal performance pressures, and classroom power dynamics. While some Chinese international students found affirming spaces for cultural identity and relational trust, others encountered marginalization through monolingual norms and deficit discourses. The study advances a multidimensional understanding of class participation and engagement for Chinese international graduate students, calling for inclusive pedagogical practices that honor linguistic diversity and temporal equity. The findings offer practical insights for Asia–Pacific institutions that are preparing students for transnational education and for global educators seeking to support culturally diverse learners.*

Keywords: Chinese international students, classroom participation, investment, linguistic capital, neoliberalism, time inheritance, transnational education

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, internationalization has reshaped higher education globally, with countries such as Canada emerging as key destinations for international students, particularly those from the Asia–Pacific region. As of 2023, Canada hosted more than one million international students, including more than 102,000 from China, making it the second-largest international cohort (WES, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2023). These students contribute to Canada's cultural and economic vitality. However, Chinese international students are often "stereotyped as less orally and culturally engaged in and out of the classroom than domestic students in Canada" (Xiao, 2024, p. 491).

Classroom participation and engagement are often considered key indicators of student academic success. However, traditional research has framed class participation and engagement primarily through cognitive or behavioral models emphasizing motivation, attention, and effort (Darmody et al., 2022; Fredricks et al., 2004; Grosik & Kanno, 2021; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). While these perspectives are valuable, they often overlook how class participation and engagement are shaped by broader sociocultural forces.

This study addresses this gap by adopting socially situated frameworks, drawing on Bonny Norton's (2013) concept of *investment* and Lingling Xu's (2025) concept of *time inheritance*. By integrating these two concepts, this study offers a different lens to examine how identity, power, linguistic capital, and inherited time shape the class participation and engagement of Chinese international graduate students at a Canadian university. *Investment* highlights how students' willingness to participate and engage is mediated by perceived legitimacy and relational dynamics, whereas *time inheritance* reveals how uneven access to two kinds of time inheritance, banked and borrowed time, such as early exposure to English or participatory learning norms, shapes long-term participation and engagement.

Through in-depth interviews with sixteen Chinese international graduate students from different faculties, this study explores how these learners perceive and negotiate participation and engagement across cultural, linguistic, and institutional boundaries. In doing so, this study contributes a theoretically innovative and contextually grounded understanding of international students' class participation and engagement in Canadian contexts.

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1) How do Chinese international graduate students perceive and experience class participation and engagement in Canadian university classrooms?
2) What sociocultural, linguistic, and ideological factors influence their classroom participation and engagement?
3) How do students negotiate their identities and agency within academic power structures and pedagogical expectations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research is informed by Bonny Norton's concept of *investment*, Lingling Xu's notion of *time inheritance*, and the literature on international students' classroom participation and engagement. The following section begins by exploring the concept of *investment*, introduces the framework of *time inheritance*, and concludes by reviewing relevant studies on international students' participation and engagement in academic settings.

Concept of Investment

The concept of *investment*, first introduced by Bonny Norton (1995, 2000) and further developed with Darvin (2015, 2023), offers a critical and sociological perspective on language learning. This challenges the traditional psychological framing of motivation by emphasizing that learners' engagement is always situated within socially and historically constructed power relations. Unlike motivation, which views learning as an individual trait, *investment* emphasizes the sociocultural context and power dynamics shaping access to participation and recognition. As Darvin and Norton (2023) noted, motivation centers on individual agency, whereas *investment* emphasizes how power shapes learners' access to resources and their sense of identity. This perspective explains why even motivated students may disengage when they feel excluded.

The concept of *investment* highlights that learners engage in language learning when they see it as a pathway to symbolic and material resources, such as academic success or social mobility. Unlike static notions of motivation, *investment* is dynamic and shaped by power relations, often involving tension between wanting access to academic communities and resisting their underlying ideologies (Norton, 2000). Darvin and Norton's (2015) model frames *investment* through three intersecting dimensions: identity (how learners see themselves and are seen), capital (resources they hold or seek), and ideology (dominant norms

that legitimize certain identities and knowledge). As Darvin and Norton (2023) note, *investment* is "a site of struggle" (p. 32), where some voices are amplified and others silenced.

This model shows that class participation and engagement are not just about effort but are embedded in power structures and recognition. This approach is especially relevant for international students navigating unfamiliar linguistic markets where their prior identities and achievements may be devalued.

The Concept of Time Inheritance

Xu's (2025) concept of *time inheritance* emphasizes that educational participation and engagement could be shaped by unevenly distributed time across generations and geographies. With this, it reframes class participation and engagement not as present motivation alone but as shaped by accumulated privileges ("banked time") or disadvantages ("borrowed time"), such as early access to English or elite schooling. As Cui (2025) argued, "in this way, her [Cora] work moves beyond the traditional dichotomy of structure versus agency, offering a more layered understanding of how educational mobility is shaped by multiple temporal forces" (xix).

This concept is especially relevant for Chinese international students whose prior education may not align with Western expectations. Students from rural or under resourced backgrounds often lack early exposure to participatory learning, such as how to participate and engage in academic conversations. According to Xu (2026), "Some young people receive banked time. … parents who can afford to support them through unpaid internships, gap years, or an extra degree, and the freedom to change course or repeat a year without financial ruin..." (para. 7). Xu (2026) argues, "Others live on borrowed time…, already owing years of labor to their families before they even begin. Because their education often relies on the extreme sacrifices of parents or the missed opportunities of siblings, these students carry a heavy debt-paying mentality" (para 8).

Rather than viewing quietness as a deficit, *time inheritance* highlights how class participation and engagement reflect students' inherited educational time and lived experiences, offering a more nuanced understanding of class participation and engagement. In addition to the above two concepts, another stream of literature on Chinese international students' class participation and engagement also informed this study.

Chinese International Students' Classroom Participation and Engagement

Over the past decade, researchers have increasingly examined the class participation and engagement of Chinese international students in Western higher education. Many of these studies focused on the concept of motivation and explored what factors contributed to the relatively low level of class participation and engagement of Chinese international students (e.g., Peng, 2024; Valdez, 2015; Wang & Moskal, 2019;). Few studies have adopted a more sociological

perspective to understand Chinese international students' class participation and engagement.

Among the relevant literature, language remains a significant barrier. Many students report difficulties in understanding rapid classroom discussions, idiomatic expressions, or culturally embedded references, which hinder their willingness to contribute. Speaking in class is often perceived as a high-stakes activity; the fear of making grammatical errors, being misunderstood, or pronouncing words incorrectly deters participation (Peng, 2024; Valdez, 2015; Zhuang & Bell, 2024). These linguistic insecurities are often compounded by a fear of public embarrassment, especially in comparison to more fluent domestic peers.

In addition to language, cultural norms inherited from Confucian heritage education systems strongly influence classroom behavior. Students from China are often accustomed to teacher-centered environments where silence signifies respect and attentive learning. Speaking out without being directly called upon may be interpreted as showing off or challenging authority (Xiang, 2017; Zhuang & Bell, 2024). Such beliefs make spontaneous participation unlikely, especially in classrooms that encourage debate and open dialog. Furthermore, the concept of "saving face" discourages students from taking verbal risks, reinforcing self-imposed silence (Peng, 2024).

Psychological factors, including low confidence and a sense of identity conflict, further inhibit participation and engagement. Chinese students often struggle with "double consciousness," torn between maintaining their cultural identity and adapting to Western norms of academic expression (Valdez, 2015). The stereotype of being quiet and nonparticipatory can become internalized, leading students to self-exclude from classroom interactions. Many report feeling excluded when instructors or peers assume that they are unwilling to speak (Heng, 2019).

The mismatch between teaching methods and students' prior educational experiences also contributes to low participation and engagement. Western classrooms often emphasize interactive, student-centered pedagogies, which may overwhelm students who are accustomed to different learning styles. If university instructors do not actively manage participation or diversify engagement formats, Chinese students may feel marginalized (Wang & Moskal, 2019).

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative design. The participants were Chinese international graduate students (master-level students). Furthermore, participants with any prior direct or indirect relationship with the researcher were excluded to avoid potential bias or conflicts of interest. A convenience sample of sixteen Chinese international graduate students at the university (eight males and eight females) was ultimately interviewed. The sample was drawn from various faculties within the university. The rationale for interviewing participants from various faculties

was to increase the diversity of opinions by drawing on students' experiences across different faculties, particularly since disciplines offer distinct programs and activities.

The recruitment of interviewees began with placing posters strategically around campus and sending e-mails to Chinese international graduate students. The recruitment poster had the investigator's (Xiang) e-mail address, through which interested Chinese international graduate students could contact the investigator. Several e-mails were also sent to international students through the e-mail address provided by the campus international student center. Eventually, the participants were recruited through e-mail response and through introduction by those who had participated in the interview.

The interviews were conducted at mutually convenient locations, which were either at the university's main library or in a group study room. The selected participants were informed of their rights, including the fact that they could withdraw from the research at any time during the process and had the right to ask any questions with regard to the research.

The study involved a diverse sample of 16 Chinese international graduate students from a public university in Ontario. The female participants came from Education, Science, and Arts; the male participants represented Education, Engineering, Business, and Social Sciences. Eight had prior work experience, with one reporting 20 years in China.

The interviews, which were conducted in Mandarin, lasted 45–90 minutes and were transcribed and translated as needed. All Mandarin interviews were translated into English by Xiang, who is bilingual in Mandarin and English and has formal training in bilingual academic writing and qualitative data analysis. Chi helped review the transcriptions and proposed different theoretical frameworks to understand the original texts. To enhance accuracy and transparency, the translated transcripts were checked against the original audio files line by line. Xiang and Chi, bilingual researchers, independently reviewed a subset of translations for consistency. The data were analyzed via Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Following this, the study data were analyzed in the following steps: 1) the first phase took place while still in the field, and 2) the second phase was conducted after the interviews had been completed. During the second stage, the recorded interviews were transcribed and read several times by Xiang and Chi to determine emerging themes. 3) In the third phase, similar ideas were integrated, and several themes emerged. Codes focused on identity, capital, ideology, and structural factors. The member checks ensure trustworthiness.

RESULTS

Identity Reconstruction

Chinese international graduate students often redefine their academic and personal identities as they navigate cultural, pedagogical, and social differences in Canadian higher education. Their narratives reveal complex negotiations of self

shaped by contrasting expectations, shifting classroom dynamics, and new relational possibilities.

Many Chinese international students are struck by flexibility and individuality in Canadian teaching styles. F1 shared:

> In China… students should focus on their scores and test papers. However, in Canadian education, if well planned and well thought out, students benefit more because of their participation and engagement in the classroom.

However, this flexibility has led to inconsistencies. F1 found that professors in Canada often had complete autonomy over course content, which was sometimes a disadvantage:

> It is your luck if this professor's knowledge matches what you want to learn… Some courses were just '水课' literally meaning 'Water Course' - courses that felt unprepared, outdated, and hard to follow. I wouldn't even raise my hand, even if I had questions.

F4 echoed similar frustrations in one of her courses: "I'm an advocate of feminism, but the content in the course was outdated. It left me confused about what feminism even means today and whether I still wanted to be part of it". Class interactions in the classroom also shaped students' sense of belonging and visibility. F5 felt invisible in a classroom where most students were from the dominant cultural group. Her experiences of speaking up were met with silence: "When I answered questions, nobody responded. However, when local students spoke, their peers followed up politely. I began to wonder if my answers were culturally irrelevant".

In contrast, F8 found a welcoming environment where her Chinese heritage became a source of strength:

> My classmates and professor loved Chinese culture. I taught them about the 24 solar terms, and they were amazed. Even though my English isn't good, their interest made me feel respected and valued.

For some students, studying in Canada created a renewed sense of purpose. F2, who was older than most classmates were joyful in the intergenerational learning dynamic:

> In China, I worked with people of my age who only talked about kids and pensions. Here, young people, including me, wait patiently while I use a translator and even quote me in class. It made me want to participate, even though my English is limited.

Personal circumstances also influence students' identity formation. F7, a single mother, shared a profound moment of inclusion when she had to bring her children to class during the school professional development (PD) Day: "My professor did not just allow it; she welcomed my kids as 'special guest speakers' and brought snacks. In China, I would hide that I'm a single mother. However,

here, I felt seen and respected". M2, a queer student, recalled painful experiences of rejection and attempted "cures" in China. In contrast, a class of qualitative methods introduced him to queer theory and a sense of acceptance:

> The professor said, 'Love is love,' and quoted Pope Francis: 'If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has goodwill, then who am I to judge him?' I felt like someone finally understood me.

Some students expressed complex emotions around national identity and historical recognition. M4 expressed pride in Canadian–Chinese relations through figures such as Dr. Bethune but disappointment with the invisibility of Chinese railway workers' contributions. M6 recounted a racist encounter in Toronto that left a lasting impact: "Someone said something racist to me in a mall. After that, I just wanted to pass my classes and go home. I didn't want my kids to experience this kind of pain".

These accounts show how identity reconstruction is neither linear nor uniform. For some, Canadian classrooms offered spaces for growth, healing, and self-expression. For others, exclusion, outdated content, and social silence complicated their learning journeys. However, all stories reflect a dynamic interplay between students' past and present selves, as they negotiate new meanings of who they are and who they are becoming in transnational academic spaces. This process of negotiation, to some extent, influences class participation and engagement. Additionally, different capitals can shape and reshape their class participation and engagement. Interplay of Capital in Shaping Academic Participation and Engagement

The participants' classroom engagement was shaped by linguistic, cultural, social, and economic capital. These factors influence how students participate, how comfortable they feel speaking, and how they navigate academic expectations. Their experiences show that engagement is not only individual but also structured by unequal access to valued resources in the academic environment.

Linguistic Capital

For many participants, their English accent and fear of miscommunication served as major barriers to verbal classroom participation and engagement. These concerns influenced not only how often they spoke but also how they chose to interact in academic settings. F3, for instance, expressed self-consciousness about her regional accent:

> My English is not good, especially my accent. I am from southern China, and sometimes my pronunciation sounds strange. My professors often have to say 'pardon' many times, and I don't want that to happen.

This concern was echoed by F5, who linked her silence in class directly to fears of wasting others' time:

> My pronunciation is not good, and I often don't raise my hand because I am afraid of wasting people's time trying to understand me. I truly appreciate the written communication format that my professor designed for us.

Some participants also felt that speaking after fluent or native speakers heightened their insecurity. As F7 explained, "I don't want to speak after students with standard accents because that makes my accent more obvious. It's embarrassing, so I never raise my hand after local students". The issue extended beyond pronunciation to tone and confidence, as M2 noted:

> My voice is very thin, and classmates often laugh at me and give me nicknames when I am in primary school in China. My accent slows communication, so I often stay silent—but that doesn't mean I am not engaged.

Despite these challenges, several participants found alternative ways to participate meaningfully. M5 preferred private communication with instructors: "There are many local students in my class. If I speak with my accent, I feel bad for them. Therefore, I usually don't speak in class, but I email the professor if I have questions". Similarly, M8 appreciated the kindness of his peers and instructors but still hesitated to speak up: "My professor and classmates are kind, but every time I speak, I feel like I make the professor spend extra time clarifying what I mean. Therefore, I rarely speak". These responses highlight how linguistic capital, particularly accent and pronunciation, can deeply affect one's sense of belonging and perceived legitimacy in academic discourse.

Cultural Capital

The participants also described adjusting to different academic norms, particularly communication, authorship, and classroom discourse. The Canadian expectation to acknowledge and build upon others' ideas during discussions was unfamiliar and initially uncomfortable for many. M7 reflected on this cultural contrast when describing a graduate education class:

> Local students often quote others' work or even personal conversations during discussions. In China, we usually do not quote during everyday conversations. If we use ancient poetry, we cite it—but here, even building on someone else's idea requires formal acknowledgment. This made me feel uncomfortable because I didn't have that habit.

This dissonance was further illustrated by F3, who recounted a group project in which she presented on behalf of her team:

> We provided a great discussion and developed a solid idea for our presentation. I delivered it, and the professor and classmates thought it was wonderful. However, afterward, a group member told me that they felt uncomfortable because I did not acknowledge their contribution.

Initially, she was confused: "In China, group work is seen as collective. We don't usually single out individual contributions". However, over time, she adapted: "Now, I realize it's important in Canada to respect others' intellectual input. I often quote now". This learning curve was also observed by M1, who attended a seminar and felt out of place:

> I felt I couldn't join the discussion meaningfully. In China, discussions serve a different function. Here, people acknowledge and build on what others say. I wasn't trained that way—I just focused on expressing my own opinion and found it hard to connect with others.

He appreciated this approach but noted, "I lack the skills to engage in this way. It's a valuable method, but new to me". These narratives illustrate that cultural capital not only is about knowledge acquisition but also involves learning implicit academic norms and skills that must be developed through interaction and practice in the host culture.

Social Capital

While linguistic and cultural barriers created initial challenges, many participants shared how building personal relationships with peers, professors, and staff positively shaped their academic experiences. F2 emphasized the comfort of having peer networks: "I feel more comfortable when I have personal connections with classmates, especially since most of my peers are also Chinese. That network helps". M4 provided a compelling example of how social connections can open academic pathways:

> The professors appreciate the students who actively reflected on the course content. I often email my reflections and questions. One professor invited me for a coffee chat and encouraged me to apply for a PhD under his supervision. That made me more active in class.

However, views on forming relationships with professors are not universally positive. F2, on the basis of her work experience, believed in maintaining professional boundaries: "It's not ideal to form personal relationships with professors. A good working relationship is good, but it should not cross boundaries. Sometimes, less is more". On the other hand, F7 highlighted how social bonds even extended to her personal life:

> My classmates are so nice. Sometimes, I bring my kids to class, and they play with them. After class, I invite classmates to dinner. These relationships give me more energy and motivation for class.

M4 also acknowledged the role of support staff in expanding his sense of academic belonging:

> I couldn't find a job, but a staff member introduced me to a summer campus work program. That experience gave me confidence, especially in my human resource management class.

These reflections show that social capital through formal and informal networks can compensate for linguistic and cultural barriers, offering crucial emotional and practical support in academic life.

Economic Capital

In addition to linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions, participants consistently pointed to economic capital as a significant influence on their academic engagement—particularly in terms of the high cost of textbooks. For many, this financial burden was both unexpected and difficult to manage.

M2 recalled his initial shock at the cost of course materials: "I was shocked that one textbook is over $300. In China, the cost of textbooks is usually included in tuition. It's way too expensive here". Similarly, F3 found herself in a difficult position when her professor insisted on a print version: "The textbook is too expensive, and I couldn't afford it. I tried to buy a digital copy, but my professor did not allow it—he required the print version". For some students, textbook costs amounted to hundreds of dollars across multiple courses. M6 shared, "I bought three textbooks in total, costing over $500. It was too expensive. However, after the class, I returned them to the bookstore as used books". Despite the high costs, not all students viewed textbook pricing as unfair. M7 offered a different perspective: "The textbook is expensive, but I think it's a way of protecting intellectual property. I support that".

However, many participants hoped for more economically accessible alternatives. F1 suggested that professors make better use of university library resources:

> I wish my professor could give us readings that we can download from the library. We've already paid library fees, and I don't want to buy a $200 textbook for a course that won't apply to my future career.

Similarly, M5 called for more financially considerate and experiential approaches to teaching: "I think the lessons shouldn't rely so heavily on textbooks. They should consider students' actual economic abilities and focus more on hands-on experiences".

These accounts underscore the economic dimension of capital and how it affects student participation and learning. Beyond affordability, students also questioned the value and flexibility of textbook-based instruction, especially when alternative, lower-cost resources were available through institutional channels.

Neoliberal Values

Many participants revealed that their participation and engagement in class were often shaped by external expectations rooted in neoliberal ideologies, particularly those emphasizing performance, competition, and market-oriented outcomes.

F3 reflected on her uncertainty about classroom contributions, stating, "Sometimes I truly do not know what I can contribute to the conversation or what

I can talk and share, but class participation is one of the marking criteria. I often participate in the conversation just like performances". Her participation was less about authentic engagement and more about fulfilling an evaluative requirement. Similarly, M4 shared

> I often feel like I am an animal trying to show my efforts to be gregarious and willing to share. Sometimes, when I was in a group, although I had nothing to share, when the professor walked around to see how we were doing, I spoke just to avoid looking like I wasn't contributing.

F2 echoed this performative engagement, admitting, "To show that I was participating, I sometimes spoke Chinese with my Chinese group members or just chatted about other topics to appear like I was speaking".

Neoliberal values also influence students' academic choices. F4 recalled, "When I selected courses, most of my classmates and my parents guided me to choose what is good for your future career and easy to make money. However, I do not like those courses". She further shared the tension she faced when pursuing a more creative project: "When I decided to make my graduate thesis an exhibition, my parents did not support me, and my classmates doubted me—but I liked it and loved it". Her choice highlighted personal resistance against dominant ideologies that prioritize economic return over personal meaning.

The pressure to perform and succeed also took a toll on students' well-being. F7, when asked about managing academic stress, nearly broke down:

> Every night, I feel enormous pressure and cry. I turned to the campus clinic for help. They only gave me a hotline number. I didn't want to talk to a stranger about my privacy. I feel sorry about that, but I just don't know how to manage the emotion. Sometimes I feel like I'm blamed for having these emotions, but I wonder—what if the world is wrong?

Her words underscore the individualized framing of stress and emotional struggles under neoliberal systems, where institutional support often shifts responsibility toward the individual.

Students' willingness to question authority was also influenced by strategic concerns. M7 explained,

> Sometimes, I don't want to challenge my professor, even if I think what they said is wrong, because I want their reference letter. I'm an international student and don't have Canadian work experience. Support from professors is very important. Therefore, sometimes I don't ask questions because I worry it will show my incapability or make me seem stupid.

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight that low classroom participation and engagement among Chinese international graduate students stem from language barriers, differing pedagogies, and both internal and external motivations (e.g., career aspirations), which aligns with the findings of previous studies (Peng, 2024; Valdez, 2015; Wang & Moskal, 2019). Traditional cognitive models emphasize traits such as motivation and effort (Fredricks et al., 2004) but overlook sociocultural dynamics that are central to international students' experiences (Norton, 2013).

For instance, F3 avoided speaking due to fears about her accent, illustrating what Norton (2013) described as the "tension between the desire to speak and the fear of being marginalized" (p. 8). F1 noted that although Canadian classes encourage participation, some lacked structure—the so-called "水课"—which discouraged her involvement. This reflects Cummins' (2001) argument that students engage only when they can meaningfully invest their identities in learning.

M2 admitted to speaking in class just to appear engaged, demonstrating what Back (2013) terms "symbolic performance"—participation as compliance rather than genuine involvement. In contrast, F5 and F2 engaged more when their cultural identities were acknowledged, affirming Norton's (2013) claim that identity investment flourishes when students see themselves as part of a supportive learning community.

These findings suggest that participation and engagement are not merely verbal contributions but are shaped by cultural recognition, pedagogical legitimacy, and relational trust. In other words, Mao (2022) shared her learning experiences in Canada and argued that her engagement and involvement were characterized by "compassion, connection, commitment, and creativity" (p. 1036). Educators must shift from narrow views of participation and engagement to approaches that foster identity investment and inclusive participation and engagement.

Neoliberalism and the Performance of Participation

Neoliberalism, with its focus on individual accountability, market logic, and performativity, has reshaped higher education (Giroux, 2014; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Students are expected to self-manage and constantly display productivity and engagement, often leading to performative rather than authentic participation. For example, F3 admitted to speaking in class merely to meet grading requirements, whereas M4 described speaking under the watch of professors to appear active—reflecting Ball's (2003) notion of performativity.

This pressure aligns with Brown's (2015) view of students as market-driven subjects who treat education as investment. F2 chose courses on the basis of career returns rather than interest, illustrating how participation becomes instrumentalized for employability. Ong's (2006) concept of "neoliberal subject-making" explains how such environments push students to perform visibility and competence, often at the expense of genuine engagement.

Moreover, neoliberal participation norms favoring assertiveness can marginalize students from cultures that value listening and collective harmony. Shore and Wright (2015) argued that audit cultures reduce students to consumers and learn measurable outcomes, limiting space for culturally inclusive pedagogies.

These findings reveal that neoliberal ideology not only commodifies participation but also reinforces inequities by privileging narrow standards of engagement that disadvantage international students. Educators must critically

examine these norms and create spaces that value diverse ways of learning and participating.

Time Inheritance in Class Participation and Engagement

While Norton's *investment* highlights identity, ideology, and capital in class participation and engagement, Xu's (2025) concept of *time inheritance* offers a critical temporal perspective. Following her concept, class participation and engagement are shaped not only by present conditions but also by students' access to "banked" or "borrowed" time—accumulated or deprived of temporal resources.

F5, with limited exposure to participatory learning, struggled with verbal spontaneity, reflecting inherited temporal inequity. M1's challenge in quoting peers stemmed not from a lack of competence but from underdeveloped dialogic practices shaped by past educational contexts. F2's prior work experience became a valuable temporal asset, aiding her academic reintegration, whereas M4 felt demotivated by the historical erasure of Chinese contributions, illustrating how perceived temporal injustice affects class participation and engagement.

Time inheritance reveals that participation and engagement are longitudinal processes influenced by cultural timelines and generational access. Supporting international students requires pedagogical flexibility that honors diverse learning rhythms and rejects deficit assumptions, aligning with equity-based teaching that values temporal plurality.

From English to Englishes

Traditional English language norms often privilege native speaker accents and rhetorical styles, marginalizing those who speak World Englishes—legitimate, culturally grounded forms of English (Kachru, 1985; Jenkins, 2006; Z. Xu, 2017). This deficit view frames language barriers as personal shortcomings, overlooking the rich cultural knowledge that international students bring (Chi et al., 2025; Valdez, 2015; Peng, 2024; Zhuang & Bell, 2024).

The participants in this study internalized these biases, with F3 fearing her accent wasting others' time and others withholding participation out of fear of being misunderstood. These anxieties reflect not only linguistic insecurity but also deeper ideological biases (Flores & Rosa, 2015). As Norton (2013) noted, language is a site of identity negotiation and power.

Adopting a strengths-based approach means valuing students' ideas over linguistic form and affirming their right to speak in their own accents. The English-to-Englishes paradigm (Canagarajah, 2006) shifts focus from native-like norms to intelligibility and respect, promoting inclusive engagement and resisting linguistic marginalization.

To support this, educators must decenter native-speaker standards, incorporate multilingual practices, and critically address language ideologies. Embracing Englishes is both pedagogically effective and ethically imperative for equitable, inclusive classrooms.

Implications

To support equitable and inclusive participation, we offer the following recommendations:

For host institutions, especially in Canada, it is essential to adopt strengths-based pedagogies that affirm students' cultural identities and linguistic diversity. This includes recognizing World Englishes, expanding participation beyond verbal contributions, and redesigning assessment practices to value meaningful engagement over performance. Faculty training should focus on cultural humility and inclusive teaching strategies.

For Asia–Pacific sending institutions, early preparation is key. Integrating dialogic learning and critical literacy into domestic education can help students adapt to participatory classrooms abroad. Training should also support academic identity development and highlight English as a space for expression and knowledge-building, not just utility.

For policymakers, addressing temporal inequities is crucial. Policies should fund both predeparture and postarrival programs, such as language training and academic orientation, especially for students from underresourced backgrounds. Ensuring temporal equity allows all students to fully engage and thrive.

Ultimately, improving international student engagement requires not only pedagogical innovation but also a commitment to affirming diversity and treating students' experiences as assets, not deficits.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. First, a sample of sixteen Chinese international graduate students (8 males and 8 females) was drawn from one university in southwestern Ontario. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized. Second, the participants were drawn from various disciplines, which means that the participants may have differential experiences with classroom engagement and participation. Although the purpose of this qualitative approach is to explore different perceptions and views, opportunities for classroom engagement and participation may differ on the basis of students' disciplines or fields of study. For example, students from science-related faculties may have more opportunities to engage and participate in the classroom as a consequence of mandatory participation in experiments, laboratory work, etc.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a nuanced understanding of Chinese international graduate students' participation and engagement in Canadian classrooms by introducing a sociotemporal lens that combines Norton's concept of *investment* and Xu's concept of *time inheritance*. Moving beyond cognitive models, it frames class participation and engagement as shaped by identity, power, and inherited educational timelines. The findings reveal that class participation and engagement are influenced not only by language or effort but also by how students are

positioned within institutional and cultural dynamics. While some faced neoliberal pressures and monolingual norms, others found inclusion through relational trust and cultural validation. The study contributes a hybrid framework for understanding international student engagement as socially and temporally situated. This perspective offers valuable insights for future research and practice in transnational education across the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

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In preparing this manuscript, we used artificial intelligence (AI) tools for editing. The sections in which AI tools were employed are the Introduction and Discussion. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and academic integrity guidelines. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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