When English doesn't impress: The social limits of prestige in casual Mandarin conversations

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Abstract

English is widely viewed as a form of institutionalized cultural capital in China associated with education, global mobility, and professional advancement (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Hu & McKay, 2012; Lin, 2014, 2018; Pan & Block, 2011; Qi, 2016). However, it remains unclear whether this symbolic value carries over into informal, everyday interactions. Grounded in Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, this study investigates how the presence of English affects listener evaluations of speakers in casual contexts. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (Mandarin-only or English-mixed) and listened to a controlled dialogue excerpt recorded based on transcripts selected from the ASCEND corpus (Lovenia et al., 2022). Participants rated the two speakers across six dimensions: interpersonal traits, help-seeking preference, willingness to engage, and perceived education, income, and social standing. Results showed that the English-mixed speaker was rated significantly lower in affability, intelligence, and modernity, and was also less likely to be approached for help or for future interaction. These findings suggest that English use in informal settings may reduce perceived emotional accessibility and social closeness, highlighting Bourdieu's (1986) argument that the value of cultural capital is context-dependent and contingent on the norms of the field in which it is performed.

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1. Introduction

With about 1.5 billion speakers, English is the most widely spoken language in the world; however, less than 400 million are native speakers (Chua, 2022). The prevalence of English in the world today is attested for by its use in various facets of life. English accounts for 60% of the internet content and is the lingua franca from pop culture to the global economy (Chua, 2022). The top 100 of the most influential scientific journals are published in English, and it is also the language used for international aeronautical communications (Alderson, 2009; Chua, 2022).

As English becomes an international language, many scholars have been exploring the ideological issues behind the function and use of the language in various places (e.g., Doğançay-Aktuna & Kiziltepe, 2005; Hilgendorf, 2007 etc.). More specifically, researchers are investigating the motivations behind the spread of English, teaching pedagogies in educational institutions, and attitudes toward the English language (e.g., Busse, 2017; Hu, 2002; Hyrkstedt & Kalaja, 1998 etc.). One region where these different perspectives on English have been extensively studied is East Asia, where English holds a particularly complex and dynamic role (e.g., Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Jiang, 2003; Lin, 2014, 2018).

This thesis focuses specifically on China, where English plays a particularly complex role. Decades of government-led English education policies, combined with China's rapid globalization and economic rise, have solidified English as a language of prestige, professionalism, and upward mobility (e.g., Feng, 2012; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002 etc.). While existing scholarship confirms the high value of English in academic and professional settings, less is known about how it is perceived in informal, everyday interactions. This study asks: Does English still signal prestige when it appears in casual Mandarin conversation? Or does its meaning shift outside institutional contexts? Using Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital as a framework, this thesis explores how listeners perceive the presence of English in casual Mandarin conversation– whether they elevate, diminish, or complicate the speaker's social image. In China's linguistic landscape where English is both aspirational and increasingly routine, these questions are not only timely, but also necessary.

2. Background

2.1. English: The global language

Before discussing China, it is important to situate the spread and status of English within a broader global and regional context. Understanding how English gained international

prominence and how this has played out across East Asia provides an essential background for analyzing its role in China today.

A useful structure for understanding the status of English in the world is Kachru's conceptualization (1985) of the three circles of English (as cited in Van Herk, 2018). This model categorizes countries into three concentric circles based on the role English plays within their societies. The inner circle includes countries where English has an official status and is the first language of most people (e.g., United States, Canada, United Kingdom). The outer circle comprises countries where English holds historical significance due to colonial influences and continues to play an institutional role (e.g., India, Ghana, Singapore). Lastly, the expanding circle consists of countries where English has no official status but is still widely taught and used as a foreign language (e.g., China, Japan, Egypt). While the dominance of English in the inner and outer circles has greatly contributed to its global diffusion, it is the ever-accelerating spread of English in the expanding circle that established English as an international language (Hu & McKay, 2012).

David Crystal (2003) further explains how a language attains global status. According to Crystal, global status is achieved when a language gains special recognition across nations, either as an official language used in government, education, and media, or as a prioritized foreign language in educational systems. English, evidently, attained its current global status through both trajectories. In countries that had been colonized by an English speaking power, English was institutionalized as an official language (Crystal, 2003). In countries that were not colonized, English has been actively promoted through educational and social policy, gaining symbolic value as a marker of modernity and economic opportunity (Lin, 2014, 2018; Liu et al., 2023).

This context is especially relevant in East Asia, where English has emerged as key for achieving internationalization. During the late twentieth century, many economies in this region transitioned from agriculture to industrialization (Lin, 2018). This shift resulted in an extraordinary economic growth, one epitomized by the World Bank (1993) as the "East Asian Miracle". From 1965 to 1990, 23 economies of East Asia grew faster than any other region globally. This unprecedented growth was driven by policies that emphasized international trade, human capital investment, and macroeconomic stability. Within this environment, English became a crucial public good, one essential not only for modernization but also participation in global economic, culture, and political arenas (Hu & McKay, 2012). It was against this backdrop

that the turn of the 21st century came to be marked as the beginning of the spread of English in East Asia (Lin, 2018).

2.2. English in China

2.2.1. Cultural background

While these regional patterns shape the broader context, China's relationship with English is particularly complex and deeply tied to its own historical, political, and economic trajectories. In the early 1950s, China's foreign language priorities were influenced by its alliance with the Soviet Union, which led to Russian becoming the primary foreign language promoted in education (Lam, 2022; Li, 2020). However, as Sino-Soviet relations soured in the late 1950s, China turned westward for economic ties. This shift led to the drafting of English curricula in junior high schools in 1957 and colleges in 1961, as well as the establishment of several foreign language schools between 1960 and 1965 in cities like Beijing, Dalian, Hangzhou (Cheng et al., 2021; Huan, 1986; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Lam, 2002). Yet this momentum was abruptly halted by the Cultural Revolution (1966- 1976), during which educational institutions were shut down, and teachers and scholars were vilified and persecuted (Huan, 1986). This tumultuous decade severely disrupted not only language education, but the broader intellectual life.

The end of the Cultural Revolution and the rise of Deng Xiaoping marked a decisive shift (Huan, 1986). Recognizing the failures of a Soviet-style planned economy, Deng introduced market reforms and the open-door policy in 1978, reorienting China toward global participation (Chow, 2006; Dorn, 2023). English reemerged as a critical tool for modernization, encapsulated by government slogans such as "learning from the West" (Huan, 1986, p.2). Students were sent abroad, and foreign scholars were invited to China to give lectures and seminars on various academic subjects. This solidified English as a key conduit for accessing global knowledge.

However, China's globalization strategy, as Moore (2002) notes, was primarily economic rather than cultural or political, differing from some other East Asian countries like South Korea (Lin, 2018). This pragmatic engagement with globalization fueled the reemergence of English education throughout the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in sectors like international trade, business, and tourism (Bolton & Graddol, 2012).

By the early 2000s, English's role expanded beyond pragmatic needs to include symbolic aspirations. China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and its successful bid for

the 2008 Olympics heightened the national emphasis on English as a marker of global integration (Feng, 2012). The government's announcement that "learning English [is] for the whole nation" signaled a shift from elite circles to widespread public adoption (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002, p.53). At a national level, English became linked to modernization and China's global role; at a personal level, it became synonymous with prestige and upward social mobility.

To translate these symbolic aspirations into practice, the Chinese government enacted a series of educational policies that institutionalized English as a critical resource for both national development and individual advancement. The next section will examine these specific policies and directives that formalized English's centrality in Chinese education.

2.2.2. Promotion of English

A study surveying English education across 18 Asian countries concluded that English proficiency serves as a gatekeeper to both individual welfare and national development (Choi & Lee, 2008). In China, English language education has been central to the government's modernization agenda since the country's economic opening (Hu & McKay, 2012). Recognizing that global influence required producing a workforce fluent in English, the Chinese government positioned English as a national resource that can be utilized to generate human capital that aligned with China's ambitions for greater international recognition.

This led to a series of policies and directives aimed at introducing English earlier in students' education and enhancing its role in higher education. On January 18, 2001, the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued a mandate on the compulsory provision of English in primary schools (Hu & McKay, 2012). This mandate required English classes to be offered to students starting in the third grade. Following this, on August 28, 2001, the MOE's ministerial directive to improve the quality of undergraduate education, requiring that 5-10% of courses would be taught in English in three years. The director of the Higher Education Department of the MOE further announced that the number of English-medium courses offered would factor into university assessments, prompting elite universities vying with each other to offer more courses in English. These efforts solidified English's presence throughout China's education system, making it a core skill for academic advancement.

English's institutional importance is further cemented through the National University Entrance Qualifying Exam (*gaokao*), where it is one of the core tested subjects (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Choi & Lee, 2008). As a high-stakes exam that acts as a passport to elite

universities and future employment opportunities, *gaokao* creates a "wash-back effect" throughout China's educational system, driving families to invest in after-school programs and private tutoring for English (Bolton & Graddol, 2012, p.5). The significance of English in *gaokao* makes it not just an academic subject, but a key determinant of social mobility (Hamnett et al., 2019).

Over time, the push for English education in China has evolved from a pragmatic necessity for global trade into a symbol of prestige and upward mobility. English functions as more than a curriculum requirement; it serves as a gatekeeper to elite education and professional success. Government policies, corporate hiring trends, and internationalization efforts have reinforced the high social value of English (Guo & Sun, 2014; Wang et al., 2017). These developments help explain why English in China is so closely tied to institutional structures, a dynamic that becomes important when examining whether this institutional prestige carried over into informal social contexts.

2.3. Historical precedents of prestige languages

While English's current prestige in China is shaped by policy and globalization, its rise fits into a broader historical pattern of how certain languages have both gained and lost symbolic power. While the global of English is often discussed as a contemporary phenomenon linked to globalization, economic expansion, and international communication (Crystal, 2003; Hu & McKay, 2012), it is important to recognize that English is not the first language to gain symbolic status this way. The phenomenon of prestige languages has historical precendent. Henry Kahane's work *A Typology of the Prestige of Language* (1986) provides a valuable historical framework for understanding how languages attain and maintain high social status. His analysis of languages such as Greek Koine, Old French, and Italian demonstrates that political power, economic influence, and cultural prestige are recurrent factors driving linguistic dominance.

Kahane identifies several key characteristics of prestige languages. They often emerge in societies where a dominant political or economic power promotes their use, and they are transmitted through formal education, elite endorsement, and institutional structures (Kahane, 1986). For example, Latin was maintained as the language of governance and scholarship throughout the Roman Empire and into the medieval period, while French became the language of diplomacy and aristocracy in the 17th and 18th centuries. These languages served as conduits

for intellectual and cultural advancement, granting access to knowledge, governance, and elite networks– a role that English fulfills in many societies today, including China.

Another key insight from Kahane's work (1986) is that prestige languages do not hold permanent status. Their decline is often linked to shifting sociopolitical structures, nationalistic movements prioritizing local languages, or changes in global power dynamics. Latin gradually lost its dominance as vernacular languages gained institutional legitimacy. Similarly, French, which was once the language of European courts and diplomacy, receded in influence as English replaced it as the dominant language in the 20th century.

This historical model is especially useful for understanding the current role of English in China as it reflects many of the mechanisms Kahane outlines. The rise of English as a prestigious language in China was driven by a combination of top-down policy implementation, economic transformation, and social aspiration (Hu & McKay, 2012; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Lin, 2014, 2018). Politically, English has been promoted through state-led educational reforms (Hu & McKay, 2012). Economically, China's entry into the global market, its accession to the WTO, and its bid to host international events further cemented English as a tool for international legitimacy and competitiveness (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). Culturally, English proficiency is increasingly viewed as a form of capital, offering access to elite schools, international networks, and high-paying jobs (Lin, 2014; Qi, 2016).

In this sense, English in China occupies a role similar to that once held by Latin or French. It is not only a means of communication, but a symbol of cosmopolitanism, education, and social status. However, Kahane's work (1986) also serves as a reminder that prestige is not inherent to language. It is contextually constructed and always subject to change. This thesis draws on this insight to explore whether English retains its symbolic power in informal, non-institutional settings in China. Just as Latin eventually lost its prestige when it no longer aligned with the everyday experiences of its speakers (Kahane, 1986), English's value in China may also be dependent on the context in which it is used.

These historical precedents help define the structural conditions that make a language prestigious, but they do not fully explain how this prestige is experienced and reproduced in everyday life. In contemporary China, it remains unclear whether English's institutional prestige extends into informal, non-institutional settings, where its use is neither expected nor required. This study explores how English operates in these casual contexts, asking whether it continues to

signal elite status, or whether its symbolic value is contingent on the setting in which it appears. The following sections review recent scholarship on English in China and introduce the theoretical framework used to analyze English's symbolic power in everyday conversation.

3. Literature review

Most existing scholarship has focused on how English functions within the formal system, particularly the institutional value of English in education, employment, and international communities (e.g., Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Pan & Block, 2011; Hu & McKay, 2012). These studies have established English as a key marker of status, intelligence, and mobility. However, they leave open the question of whether English carries the same symbolic weight when it appears casually, outside of these structured domains.

To situate this gap, the following literature review examines three major areas: (1) English in China's education system, (2) English as a marker of workplace prestige, and (3) theoretical framework that explains how language operates as a cultural capital with symbolic value.

3.1. English in education

As discussed in the previous sections, the Chinese government's promotion of English education is fueled by globalization and ambitions to achieve greater international influence. Numerous studies have explored how English has come to play a central role in education (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Feng, 2012; Hu & McKay, 2012; Pan & Block, 2012; Qi, 2016, etc.). The most dominant theme emerging from these studies is the association between proficiency in English and advancement in education. A study conducted by Qi (2016) provides an example of the impact of this policy on primary school students almost two decades after the mandate that required English to be introduced in the third grade.

Qi (2016) conducted six focus group interviews with primary school students from three different government schools in Nanjing. In the interviews, many students mentioned that they feel an immense pressure to study English and to perform well on tests. One of the students remarked that "[they] feel proud if [they] can learn the English language well" (p. 8). Words such as "helpful", "useful", and "pride" appeared frequently in the students' responses. These students believe that "English is important. If [they] don't know English, [they] will neither be able to graduate from primary school nor be able to enter a better secondary school" (p. 9). These

students also revealed the tremendous amount of burden their parents placed on them in terms of their performance in English classes, especially exams. According to students from School Two, many of them were required, by their parents, to obtain at least 90% in each English test, and all nine students from this school agreed on the comment that if "... [they] cannot meet the target, [they] would have to face punishment" (p. 11).

These students also commented on the hopes their parents had of them entering the Nanjing Foreign Languages School (NFLS), which is one of the top middle schools in Nanjing. Reasons students provided revolved around two main themes (Qi, 2016). The first is that being able to study in NFLS would lead to a better chance of getting into a prestigious high school, which then paves the roads for gaining admissions into a good university. Secondly, students mentioned that studying at NFLS means more opportunities to study abroad in the future because the school provides high quality English education. Admittance into NFLS is one of the biggest motivators of these students' drive to study English as the entrance tests are all conducted in English. The gatekeeping role of English in terms of education is extremely salient in these responses.

In addition to revealing the association between English proficiency and personal prestige, especially regarding education, another common theme was the power of English in education and career advancement. As explained by Hu and McKay (2012), the spread of English in the world would not have occurred at such a rapid pace without the inroads English has made into the educational systems of East Asian countries, namely China, Japan, and Korea. Primary school students interviewed in Qi's study explained that "Many people have started learning English nowadays. It is beneficial for finding a job, admission to better schools" (Qi, 2016, p. 9). Similar sentiments were reported by college students and professors in a study conducted by Pan and Block (2011) which investigated their language beliefs in regards to English. The authors focus on seven questions from a questionnaire and two extracts from interviews that were a part of a larger project conducted in 2008 aimed to examine English language ideologies in China (see also, Pan, 2010).

The results from the questionnaire indicated that over 60% of teachers and students acknowledge and agree with the proposition that English is the dominant global language, and over 70% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that China will become more globalized and internationalized with the popularization of English. When asked about their

motivations for learning English, it is the instrumental value of English that attracted students as many believed that having a good command of English is necessary for acquiring social prestige. The instrumental value of English is evident in the excerpts from the interview conducted with a sophomore who was studying economics at a language-study focused university in Beijing: "... competence in English is a great advantage in finding jobs" (p.397). He mentioned an instance in which a college senior who went for a job interview was in an advantageous position because the interview was conducted entirely in English. Another anecdote shared by the student was about his brother-in-law's younger brother who is a taxi driver. He practiced English vocabulary regularly because he had lost many job opportunities "to take foreigners [as] he could not understand what they were saying" (p. 398).

As illustrated in the two studies reviewed above, the power the English language wields in terms of the prospects of someone's education is undeniable. Lin's research (2014) on the ideological character of the English language in East Asia reaffirms the findings of these studies (Pan & Block, 2011; Qi, 2016). As Lin (2014) concluded, English is regarded in a positive light because it is the language of advantage and the means to enhance personal competitiveness. For example, the primary school students in Qi's study (2016) described learning English as a way to gain a competitive edge over their peers. In this context, English education in China is then framed as a race for social and academic advantage.

An immediate consequence of this was the flourishing of the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry. The ELT industry is generating billions of dollars of revenue for China's economy. In 2010, it was reported that the market training value of English in China is a staggering 3.3 billion U.S. dollars (Hu & McKay, 2012, p. 347). This rapid development of the ELT industry in China is not only fueled by the government's promotion of English learning and the importance of English in academic circles, but also— and perhaps more significantly— by parents' strong desire for their children to excel in English, which has fueled the rise of private ELT institutions (Lin, 2014). These ELT institutions capitalize on parents' hope to give their children a head start in English and further reinforces the impact of English in terms of economy, education, employment, and future development.

Advancement in academia is tied to English from the very beginning of a student's education career. English is a core component in high school and university entrance exams (Hu & McKay, 2012). Academic publications dominate the lives of graduate and doctorate students

who must increasingly submit their research in high profile scientific journals, which all publish in English (Hyland, 2016). English is the lingua franca of academia, serving as the common language for research dissemination and international collaboration (Kitchin, 2005). Having a good command of English gives an individual the opportunity to open doors that are closed to others due to the very existence of a language barrier as they have a distinct advantage in navigating academic circles and accessing global opportunities.

However, while institutional structures dominate much of English's perceived value, regional variation also plays a role. Research has shown that sociopolitical and educational contexts shape how English is perceived across different regions in China. For example, students in Macao—where English functions as a de facto lingua franca—often displays more pragmatic, communication-oriented attitudes toward English use, whereas their mainland counterparts are more oriented toward native-speaker norms and academic correctness (Zeng et al., 2024). This contrast illustrates how localized language ideologies can shape not only the way English is taught and used, but also how it is symbolically understood within different sociolinguistic environments.

3.2. English in the workplace

English is seen as a skill that gives an individual a competitive advantage over others (Lin, 2018). The growing demand for English education is mainly driven by self-vested interests and the widespread socio-cultural perception that English proficiency is this valorized capital that has acquired the role of gatekeeping success, opportunity, status, and power. Outside of educational systems, English proficiency carries high stakes in the workplace (Hu & McKay, 2012; Jiang, 2003). For people who have entered the workforce, they are reporting an increase in the importance of English in their professional lives (He, 2017; He & Li, 2021). More and more employers are requiring certificates of the College English Test (CET), a national exam sponsored by the Higher Education Department of the MOE aimed to measure the proficiency of non-English majors. China's continuing economic development and increasing global influence led to a tremendous demand for English-proficient professionals in areas such as international law, international trade, and tourism.

In a study aimed to provide suggestions for ELT reform, He and Li (2021) explored the implications of the actual use of English in China's workplace. Results from the interview portion of the study showed that of the 44 interviews conducted, 65.9% of the participants

indicated that English is becoming more important in their work. Participants mentioned that working in companies that are either China-foreign joint ventures or foreign-owned, there is a need to communicate with colleagues who do not speak Chinese as these companies increase their presence abroad. English was viewed as a crucial tool for gaining access to foreign knowledge and information.

The growing internationalization of China's sports industry similarly highlights the role of English as both practical capital and a symbolic gatekeeper. Dou et al. (2024) examined student-athletes (SAs) navigating the demands of an increasingly globalized sports sector, where English is vital for engaging with international sporting bodies, referees, coaches, and educators. Although these SAs are required to meet the general English standards (such as CET-4) for graduation, the study emphasizes the need for specialized English for Specific Purposes (ESP), namely Sports English, to effectively participate in global sports contexts. This reinforces the broader pattern where English remains a valued form of capital, crucial for career advancement in diverse professional fields, even when its practical application varies by sector.

However, there appears to be a mismatch between the public opinion of English as a commodity, or capital, and the actual usage of English. Lin (2018) reports an engineer in a management position of a technology company saying in the interview that "high English proficiency is only necessary for those who are responsible for communicating with foreign customers, and for those who don't have such kind of need, their English ability will not have any influence on their job" (p. 12). Interview data from Pan and Block's study (2011) also reveal a similar circumstance- knowledge of English is not really necessary at some companies, but they require it nonetheless. Despite the fact that English proficiency is not required for every company and economic success is not guaranteed, through public discourse on English and government policies, communicative competence in English is still awarded high social values. For many people who are able to speak English relatively fluently, they do not simply view it as an ability and advantage they possess, they actually view it as their "value" (Lin, 2018, p. 13).

Furthermore, the competitiveness of the world market only reinforces English's associations with opportunities and success. Many studies cited proficiency in English as a necessary medium towards personal success and prestige (Choi & Lee, 2008; Henry, 2010; Lin, 2014, 2018). The English language has become a "resolution of national competitiveness" as well as a "prerequisite of personal economic achievement" (Lin, 2018, p. 12). This is supported

by economic research showing that individuals who speak English fluently tend to earn 3.4% to 6.6% more than otherwise comparable individuals without English skills (Wang et al., 2017). These attitudes reflect the importance the Chinese government has placed on acquiring technological knowledge and promoting international commerce, both of which cannot be carried out without people who have a good command of English.

These findings reinforce English's role as a form of institutionalized capital in domains like the workplace, yet they also suggest that its symbolic value may not always align with practical needs. This tension raises important questions about how English operates outside formal structures, especially in informal social contexts, which this thesis seeks to explore.

3.3. Theoretical framework

This thesis draws primarily on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural capital to examine the social value of English in informal Mandarin conversations. Bourdieu's framework provides a way to understand how symbolic resources, such as language use, educational background, or social mannerisms, can function as forms of capital that yield advantage within specific social contexts. However, these resources only operate as capital when they are recognized and validated by others in a given social field. Thus, cultural capital is not an intrinsic property of a person or behavior, but a relational one: it acquires value only when performed in ways that align with the expectations of the field in which it is used.

3.3.1. Cultural capital and the status of English in China

Bourdieu (1986) defines cultural capital as the non-economic forms of value that individuals accumulate through socialization, education, and the performance of class-linked competencies. He identifies three forms of cultural capital: embodied, which includes personal skills, mannerisms, and linguistic competencies that are internalized over time; objectified, which consists of material objects such as books and works of art that reflect cultural knowledge; and institutionalized, which takes the form of academic credentials and recognized qualifications.

In China, English functions as both embodied and institutionalized cultural capital. As an institutionalized resource, English is embedded in high-stakes standardized exams such as *gaokao,* CET-4, and CET-6, which serve as gatekeeping mechanisms for access to elite education and professional advancement (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Dou et al., 2024; Hu & McKay, 2012;

Lin, 2014). Recent work has further emphasized how access to high-status English education is often shaped by regional and socioeconomic inequalities, reinforcing the role of English as a marker of elite schooling and class-based distinction (Liu et al., 2023).

At the same time, English also operates an embodied marker of intelligence, cosmopolitanism, and global orientation, which reinforces its symbolic association with elite status (Pan & Block, 2011; Qi, 2016). Individuals who speak English fluently are often perceived as possessing a type of social polish and educational privilege that signals both cultural refinement and modern global competence (Feng, 2012; Liu, 2019; Pan & Block, 2011; Qi, 2016). In China, English has come to symbolize not just linguistic ability, but also broader ideals of modernity, upward mobility, and elite social positions (Zeng & Yang, 2024) These associations elevate English to more than a practical skill but also frame it as a cultural resource tightly bound to imagined futures of success and sophistication.

However, as Bourdieu argues, the value of cultural capital is never universal or automatic; it must be recognized as legitimate by others within a particular social field. He describes how the accumulation of cultural capital is contingent on the field in which it operates, as different fields assign varying degrees of legitimacy to different forms of knowledge, including linguistic proficiency. In the case of China, English proficiency is widely acknowledged as an asset in educational and professional fields, but its status in informal linguistic spaces is uncertain. The same linguistic competence that is valued in professional interactions may not hold the same legitimacy in casual social settings, where different norms and expectations govern speech.

3.3.2. Language as capital and its contextual value

Among the various components of cultural capital, language plays a particularly significant role. Linguistic capital, a specific form of embodied cultural capital, refers to one's capacity to use language in socially valued ways: fluently, appropriately, and persuasively (Bourdieu, 1977). However, its power depends not only on competence but also on social recognition within a specific linguistic market, or the social space where linguistic products (e.g., speech, discourse) are assigned value based on the power structures that govern communication:

> "The social value of linguistic products is only placed on them in their relationship to the market, i.e., in and by the objective relationship of competition opposing them to all other

> products (and not only those with which they are directly compared in the concrete transaction), in which their *distinctive value* is confirmed" (p.654).

This suggests that the worth of any linguistic expression, including English proficiency, is not fixed but rather contingent on the broader social and linguistic market in which it circulates. Language functions as a part of symbolic power, where not everyone has the same right to speak or be listened to. According to Bourdieu (1977), whether speech is received, respected, or believed depends not just on what is said, but on who is saying it and how their legitimacy is socially recognized.

In China's professional and academic linguistic market, English proficiency is highly valued because it is linked to economic success, international mobility, and globalization (Hu & McKay, 2012). However, this same linguistic competence that is valued in professional and academic settings may not necessarily hold the same legitimacy in informal, everyday conversations.

The present study builds on this framework by asking whether the symbolic power of English persists in casual, non-institutional settings. It treats English not merely as a communicative code, but as a form of embodied capital whose social value must be performed and recognized. This approach allows for a more nuanced examination of how cultural capital operates within the relational and context-sensitive dynamics of everyday conversation.

4. Scope of the study

4.1. Institutional prestige of English in China

The prestige of English in China has been shaped by a combination of historical developments, governmental policies, and socio-economic aspirations. As discussed in previous sections, English proficiency has been systematically promoted as a national resource tied to economic development, internationalization, and upward social mobility (Feng, 2012; Hu & McKay, 2012; Lin, 2018; Liu, 2019). The government's top-down initiatives, such as introducing English education at earlier stages and including it in high-stakes exams like *gaokao* and CET, have solidified English as a form of institutionalized cultural capital, granting individual access to elite education and employment opportunities (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Pan & Block, 2011). Over time, this rhetoric has been reaffirmed and solidified as China's global influence grew. English has evolved beyond a simple linguistic tool and into a form of capital, a commodity,

owned by individuals as an asset that gives them the opportunity to move upwards in society, to advance financially, and to secure a better future in an increasingly competitive job market.

4.2. Limitations of existing research

Prior research has firmly established that English functions as a form of institutionalized capital within academic and professional domains in China (e.g., Dou et al., 2014; Pan & Block, 2011; Qi, 2016). Most of these focus on structured settings, such as education and the workplace, where English proficiency is explicitly rewarded. Within these contexts, English is often equated with prestige, intelligence, and global competence, making it a key determinant of social mobility. However, fewer studies have explored whether this prestige extends into informal social interactions, where institutional structures are absent, and social perceptions may be shaped by different norms.

One notable study that begins to address the gap in informal language use is Liu (2019), which investigates listener perceptions of Mandarin-English code-switching in recorded speech samples. Using an open-guise technique, Liu recorded a single speaker producing three different types of speech: fully Mandarin, with intraclausal switching (single English word insertions), and with interclausal switching (full English clause insertions). The study found that interclausal switching was associated with higher perceived social status and greater English proficiency, while intraclausal switching was viewed more negatively, particularly regarding social likability. However, rather than directly interrogating how English's prestige operates across different social contexts, Liu's focus remains on structural code-switching patterns and listener attitudes toward these forms. This gap leaves unanswered questions about whether English's value is consistent across social fields or is contingent on context, particularly in informal, everyday conversations where institutional rewards are absent. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how linguistic capital functions outside formal markets, where the social value of English may shift or diminish.

4.3. Purpose of current study

Building on existing research, including Liu's (2019) study of code-switching perceptions, this thesis moves beyond linguistic structures to examine the social perceptions of English use in everyday Mandarin-speaking contexts. Grounded in Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, this study investigates whether English's prestige is absolute or

context-dependent in China's evolving linguistic landscape. By focusing on informal Mandarin-dominant conversations, it aims to assess whether English continues to function as a linguistic capital in socially casual spaces. In doing so, this research contributes to broader discussions on language, power, and social hierarchy in China's evolving linguistic landscape.

4.4. Research question and hypotheses

4.4.1. Core research question

As discussed in Section 3.3, cultural capital is not inherently valuable in all contexts; the worth of language is determined by the linguistic market in which it is deployed (Bourdieu, 1977). This study applies that perspective to investigate whether English's symbolic power persists across different social fields or diminishes in informal interactions. This study seeks to answer the following research question: *Does the symbolic power of English as a form of cultural capital in China extend beyond professional and academic settings to influence social perceptions of speakers in informal, everyday conversations?*

4.4.2. China's linguistic landscape

While this study focuses on Mandarin-dominant informal settings, it acknowledges China's linguistic diversity. China's general linguistic landscape offers limited space for English in everyday life. Mandarin remains the dominant medium of communication in both formal and informal settings across much of the country, particularly in the north, southwest, and parts of central China, where regional Mandarin dialects, though diverse, tend to be mutually intelligible (Ramsey, 1987). However, China is also marked by high linguistic diversity, and in many southern provinces, such as Guangdong, Fujian, and Zhejiang, non-Mandarin Sinitic languages like Cantonese, Hakka, Wu, and Fujianese are widely spoken and often mutually unintelligible. In these areas, Mandarin itself may carry formal or institutional associations, potentially shifting how English is perceived. However, this thesis concentrates on Mandarin-speaking markets to examine whether English's symbolic power extends beyond its institutional foundations.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research design overview

This study investigates whether English retains symbolic power as a form of cultural capital in informal Mandarin conversations. Following Bourdieu's (1986) framework of cultural

capital, the research examines whether English continues to signal social status, intelligence, or prestige in casual conversations where institutional structures are absent.

To explore listener perceptions, this study draws methodological inspiration from the matched-guise technique (Lambert et al., 1960; Lambert, 1967), an established method for indirectly eliciting language attitudes and perceptions through controlled speech stimuli. Specifically, Kimple et al.'s (1969) work on bilingual listeners' sensitivity to language choice demonstrated how subtle shifts in language use (between Spanish and English) influenced listeners' judgments about social relationships and situational appropriateness. While this study does not adopt a true matched-guise design, since participants only heard one version of the conversation, it retains the logic of stimulus control by using parallel scripts and carefully manipulated conditions to isolate the effects of the presence of English words and phrases in casual Mandarin speech.

Adapting this framework to the Chinese context, the present study uses audio recordings of a casual conversation featuring Mandarin-only speech and Mandarin mixed with English. By holding other conversational variables constant (e.g., speaker, topic, structure, tone), the study isolates the presence of English as the primary variable. This allows for a focused investigation of how English use in informal speech influences perceptions of the speakers' social traits and status, testing whether English functions as cultural capital outside its institutionalized domains.

5.2. Stimuli selection

5.2.1. Selection of the ASCEND corpus

To ensure that the conversational stimuli used in this study reflect naturalistic language use, dialogue excerpt were selected from the ASCEND corpus (*A spontaneous Chinese-English dataset for code-switching in multi-turn conversation*) (Lovenia et al., 2022). Developed to analyze spontaneous bilingual speech, the corpus consists of 10.62 hours of multi-turn conversations across a variety of topics (e.g., education, philosophy, sports, technology) that were collected from 23 Mandarin-English bilingual speakers in Hong Kong. Approximately 27% of the utterances contain code-switching, with English use varying based on topic and speaker proficiency. Given the study's aim of examining how listeners perceptions of English use in everyday, informal contexts, the spontaneous, unscripted nature of the ASCEND corpus (Lovenia et al., 2022) was especially well suited for stimulus selection. Artificially scripted

speech often fails to capture the organic flow and patterns of real-life conversations, which was a key consideration in selecting naturally occurring dialogue.

While the present study does not examine code-switching as a linguistic phenomenon (as in Liu, 2019), the code-mixed dialogues from ASCEND offer a methodological solution for designing experimental stimuli that reflect authentic everyday language use in China. This choice aligns with the linguistic reality in China, where fully English conversations in informal settings are rare (Yang, 2006; Zhao & Campbell, 1995). Instead, it is more common for English phrases or words to appear in Mandarin-dominant speech, particularly outside of institutional contexts (Moradi & Chen, 2022). For this reason, Mandarin-English code mixing provides a more ecologically valid method for evaluating how listeners interpret the symbolic function of English in casual speech, as the goal of this study is to examine social perceptions toward English in informal interactions. If this study were to use fully English dialogues, it would not accurately reflect the natural linguistic landscape of casual conversations in China and would risk producing artificial experimental conditions.

It is important to clarify that this study does not seek to analyze attitudes toward code-switching as a linguistic phenomenon as examined in studies such as Li and Milroy (1995) and Liu (2019). Rather, code-mixing here serves as an experimental tool to assess whether English continues to function as a cultural capital in non-institutional contexts.

5.2.2. Selection and adaptation of conversational samples

To ensure that the dialogue used in this study are representative of casual, everyday conversations, the selection criteria prioritized:

(1) Casual, everyday topics (e.g., social outings, personal experiences)
(2) Exclusion of academic and professional discourse to maintain focus on informal speech.
(3) Natural conversational flow, avoiding overly structured or context-specific exchanges, such as the beginning of a conversation

The original excerpt selected from the ASCEND corpus featured both speakers using a mix of Mandarin and English (Lovenia et al., 2022). To construct a Mandarin-only control condition, I translated all English phrases into Mandarin while preserving the original conversational tone and structure. As a native speaker, I completed the initial translation and then confirmed its accuracy and naturalness with the two individuals, both native speakers, who

recorded the dialogue. Minor modifications were also made for clarity and standardization (e.g., removing disfluencies, ensuring comparable dialogue length). However, the core linguistic and pragmatic structure of the dialogue remained intact to preserve their authenticity. The final script reflected a casual exchange between two acquaintances discussing their weekend and leisure activities where the conversation is informal, light, and relatable. The full scripts of the conversation are provided in Appendix A and Appendix B, and a translation is provided in Appendix C.

5.3. Recording and experimental conditions

The final set of conversational stimuli was recorded by two fluent Mandarin-English bilingual speakers, one male and one female. To maintain experimental control, the speakers recorded two versions of the same conversation:

(1) A Mandarin-only version, where both speakers used only Mandarin throughout.
(2) An English-mixed version, where Speaker B inserted English words or phrases into otherwise Mandarin speech.

All other aspects of the conversation, including topic, structure, length, and tone, remained consistent across the two versions. This ensured that the presence of English was the only manipulated variable, allowing for a controlled investigation of how English use in informal speech might influence social perceptions. Participants were randomly assigned to hear one of the two versions, ensuring that any differences in perceptions of the speakers could be attributed to the language variation rather than other factors.

Prior research has shown that listeners often form immediate social judgments based solely on vocal characteristics such as pitch, tone, and perceived gender, even in the absence of content (Ko et al., 2009; Lambert et al., 1960). These vocal cues can influence perceptions of warmth, intelligence, or credibility, and thus may shape how speakers are socially evaluated. Therefore, when preparing the final recordings, nine different versions of the conversation were created to take into account and test for various gender and pitch combinations. These included an all-female pairing with one lower-pitched voice, and two male-female pairings in which the female speaker's pitch was varied. In addition to testing different vocal pairings, the English-mixed condition included two versions in which the two speakers switched roles: the same conversation was performed twice, with each speaker delivering the Mandarin-only and

English-mixed lines. This allowed for direct comparison of how the same English insertions were received when performed by different voices.

However, after reviewing the recording options, the version featuring a lower-pitched female Speaker A paired with a male Speaker B was selected, with Speaker B delivering the English words and phrases. This choice was based on overall conversation naturalness, as this pairing sounded the most spontaneous and fluid, thus aligning best with the goal of replicating an informal, everyday interaction. Given the present study's emphasis on creating stimuli that closely resembles natural conversational speech in China, the naturalness of the final recording was prioritized. Additionally, due to time constraints and concerns about participant recruitment, it was not feasible to test all nine versions experimentally. Therefore, the most natural-sounding version was chosen for the final survey.

In addition, by leveraging a code-switching corpus for methodological rather than theoretical reasons, this study effectively addresses the challenge of studying English in casual speech while maintaining experimental control over linguistic variables. The ASCEND corpus (Lovenia et al., 2022) allows for the exploration of English's social significance in informal conversations without requiring artificial speech patterns, making it a critical component of this study's research design.

5.4. Participants

5.4.1. Eligibility criteria

To examine whether English continues to function as a form of cultural capital imbued with symbolic power outside institutional settings, it is important to recruit participants who are neither in educational institutions nor international companies. Thus, the two prerequisites participants must fulfill are:

(1) No formal affiliation with education in at least three years. This criterion aimed to ensure that participants were no longer influenced by the exam-focused educational environment in China, which often elevates the importance of English (Henry, 2010; Pan & Block, 2011). The three-year cutoff was selected based on research suggesting that transitions out of educational institutions involve gradual shifts in mindset and value system (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008).

(2) Employment in domestic, non-international companies. Participants recruited must work exclusively in companies with no international partnerships or communication demands.

This consideration was made to help avoid recruiting individuals who might associate English with professional advancement, thereby allowing more neutral evaluations of its use in informal everyday speech (e.g., He, 2017; He & Li, 2021; Hu & McKay, 2012; Jiang, 2003; Lin, 2018, etc).

These criteria were designed to minimize institutional and professional bias, offering a clearer view of how English is perceived when it is not required or expected.

5.4.2. Recruitment method

Participants were recruited through personal connections in China, specifically via my relatives' social networks. While this approach provided necessary accessibility within the constraint of time and resources, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Recruiting from personal networks may result in a skewed sample, as participants' socioeconomic status, educational backgrounds, and life experiences can significantly shape their language perceptions. As Agheyisi and Fishman (1970) notes, attitudes and perceptions are influenced by prior experiences and tend to exhibit permanence across time. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the study's findings, as participant responses may reflect the specific socioeconomic and cultural positioning of this particular sample.

5.4.3. Final participant sample

A total of 89 participants were included in the final sample for this study. Participants were assigned to one of two conditions: 45 in the Mandarin-only condition and 44 in the English-mixed condition. All participants were native Mandarin speakers currently residing in mainland China. Eight individuals were excluded prior to this final sample. Five participants assigned to the Mandarin-only condition were excluded because their responses were not captured by Qualtrics, likely due to a submission or connectivity error, and three participants assigned to the English-mixed condition were excluded due to employment at international companies.

While full demographic data were not collected due to recruitment constraints, participants assigned to the English-mixed condition were asked whether they had studied English or another foreign language during their schooling: 41 reported having studied English, 1 had not, and 2 had studied another foreign language. These figures suggest that the vast majority of participants had at least some formal exposure to English.

See Table 1 for a summary of participant allocation and language background:

Table 1. ***Participant summary and language background***

Category	Mandarin-only (*n* = 45)	English-mixed (*n* = 44)
Participants excluded	5	3
Final participants included	45	44
Studied English in school	—	41
Did not study English	—	1
Studied another foreign language	—	2

Note. Language background data were only collected for participants assigned to the English-mixed version of the survey. Dashes indicate that no data were collected for the Mandarin-only group.

5.5. Data collection procedure

The study was conducted online via a self-paced Qualtrics survey, allowing participants to complete it on any electronic device. The procedure consisted to two main components:

(1) Listening task: participants listened to a pre-recorded audio conversation between the two bilingual speakers. They were randomly assigned to either the Mandarin-only condition or the English-mixed condition. Both recordings were matched for length, topic, and tone, with the presence or absence of English as the only difference.

(2) Questionnaires: immediately after listening, participants completed a survey divided into three sections:

   (a) Speaker traits: participants rated each speaker on five traits– affability, confidence, intelligence, education, and modernity.

   (b) Interactional preference: participants responded to hypothetical social scenarios, such as which speaker they would approach for help or prefer to interact with in different social settings.

   (c) Social status assumptions: participants made comparative judgments about the speakers' likely education level, income, and overall social standing.

The survey was designed to take approximately 10- 15 minutes to complete. Participants were informed at the beginning of the anonymity of the study and that they were able to withdraw at

any point if they felt uncomfortable. The purpose of the study was not disclosed beforehand to minimize social desirability bias and encourage more spontaneous, unfiltered responses.

5.5.1. Trait selection justification

The five traits chosen for this study were selected based on foundational work by Lambert et al. (1960), whose matched-guise experiment demonstrated that listeners associate different language guises with different social attributes, even when the speaker remained the same. Their study revealed that language use alone can activate stereotypes and influence social judgments. Building on this framework, the current study adopts traits that reflect both institutional and symbolic aspects of cultural capital, in line with Bourdieu's (1986) theory. Education and intelligence capture markers of institutionalized prestige, while affability, confidence, and modernity reflect more interactional or symbolic forms of capital that may influence how speakers are perceived in informal, everyday conversation.

5.6. Data analysis

The analysis for this study combined paired samples *t*-tests and chi-square goodness of fit tests to analyze participants' responses across different measures.

For Likert-scale ratings, such as trait evaluations and interactional preferences, paired samples *t*-tests were conducted within each condition (Mandarin-only and English-mixed). Since participants rated both speakers on each measure, this approach allowed for a direct comparison between Speaker A and Speaker B with the same group of listeners. In addition to assessing statistical significance, effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) were calculated to assess the magnitude of differences between speaker ratings, *d* was computed by dividing the mean difference by the standard deviation of the difference scores. Effect sizes were interpreted using standard thresholds: 0.20 (small), 0.50 (medium), and 0.80 (large).

For categorical questions, such as behavioral preferences and perceived social status assumptions, chi-square goodness of fit tests were used within each condition. These tests evaluated whether participants' choices between speakers deviated from chance expectations. This approach made it possible to assess how English use affected both perceptions of the speakers and participants' behavioral intentions across different kinds of questions.

Additionally, as participants were not required to answer all items in the questionnaire, a small number of responses were left blank. This may have occurred either unintentionally or

because participants chose not to respond. As a result, the total number of responses varies slightly across some of the questions, and analyses were conducted using the available data for each item.

6. Results

6.1. Speaker traits

Participants rated both speakers on five personality-related traits: affability, confidence, intelligence, education, and modernity. The Mandarin-only version of the conversation served as a control condition to establish a baseline for how the two speakers were perceived in the absence of any English usage. Full results for both conditions are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. ***Trait ratings by condition: Mandarin-only***

Trait	Speaker A (M)	Speaker B (M)	Mean difference (B - A)	SD	*t*(44)	*p*	*d*	Sig?
Affability	3.09	3.22	+0.13	1.42	0.63	0.53	0.09	No
Confidence	3.11	3.2	+0.09	1.33	0.45	0.66	0.07	No
Intelligence	2.98	3.29	+0.31	1.45	1.82	0.08	0.27	No
Education	2.98	3.29	+0.31	1.45	1.82	0.08	0.27	No
Modernity	3.4	3.16	-0.24	1.17	-1.40	0.17	-0.21	No

Note. Ratings reflect participants' evaluations of speaker traits on a five-point Likert scale. *t*-values are from paired samples *t*-tests. SD refers to the standard deviation of paired difference scores. Cohen's *d* is calculated as the standardized mean difference. Significance was determined at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Table 3. ***Trait ratings by condition: English-mixed***

Trait	Speaker A (M)	Speaker B (M)	Mean difference (B - A)	SD	*t*(43)	*p*	*d*	Sig?
Affability	4.20	2.95	-1.25	1.38	-6.00	< 0.00001	-0.90	Yes
Confidence	3.82	4.05	+0.23	1.57	0.96	0.34	0.14	No
Intelligence	3.93	3.41	-0.52	1.49	-2.33	0.02	-0.35	Yes
Education	3.86	3.45	-0.41	1.50	-1.81	0.08	-0.27	No
Modernity	4.18	3.45	-0.73	1.40	-3.44	0.001	-0.52	Yes

Note. Ratings reflect participants' evaluations of speaker traits on a five-point Likert scale. *t*-values are from paired samples *t*-tests. SD refers to the standard deviation of paired difference scores. Cohen's *d* is calculated as the standardized mean difference. Significance was determined at α = 0.05.

A visual summary of mean trait ratings across both speakers and conditions is presented in Figure 1.

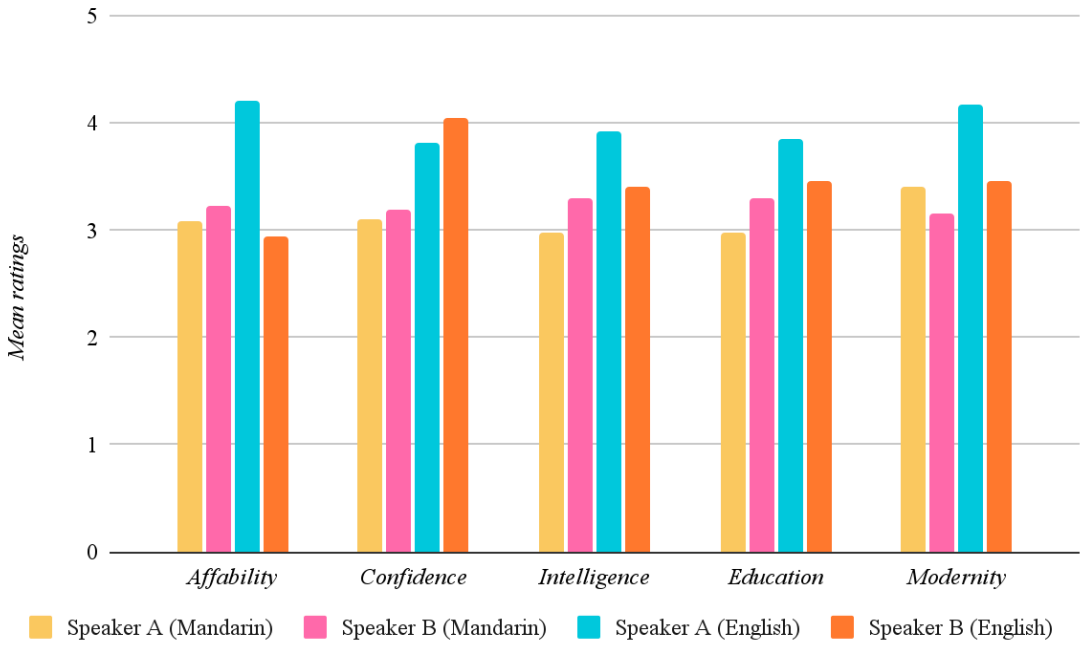

Fig 1. ***Mean trait ratings by speaker and condition***

In the Mandarin-only condition, differences in ratings between Speaker A and Speaker B were relatively small, with mean differences ranging from -0.24 to +0.31 across all traits. Paired samples *t*-tests confirmed that none of the observed differences reached statistical significance ($p > 0.05$). For example, affability showed $t(44) = 0.88$, $p = 0.533$, $d = 0.09$; intelligence showed $t(44) = 1.85$, $p = 0.075$, $d = 0.27$. While intelligence and education approached the threshold for statistical significance, they remained within the small effect size range. Standard deviations of these paired differences were relatively high, suggesting variability across participants. However, the small size of the mean differences, along with consistently non-significant *t*-tests suggest that this variability did not translate into systematic bias toward either speaker. These findings suggest that when both speakers used only Mandarin, participants generally evaluated them similarly, with no clear preference or systematic bias.

In contrast, the English-mixed condition revealed significant perceptual shifts. Speaker B, who inserted English phrases into otherwise Mandarin speech, was rated lower across multiple traits. The largest difference was observed for affability, where Speaker A was rated an average of 1.25 points higher than Speaker B. Differences were also evident for modernity (-0.73) and intelligence (-0.52).While the standard deviations of the difference scores remained similar to those in the Mandarin-only condition, the direction and size of the mean differences in the English-mixed condition were more consistent, resulting in statistically significant outcomes.

Paired samples *t*-tests showed statistically significant differences for affability ($t(43) = -5.99$, $p < 0.000001$, $d = -0.90$), intelligence ($t(43) = -2.33$, $p = 0.025$, $d = -0.35$), and modernity ($t(43) = -3.44$, $p = 0.001$, $d = -0.52$). These results indicate moderate to large effects, with the strongest result for affability. Education also showed a small-to-moderate effect ($d = -.026$), though it did not reach statistical significance ($t(43) = -1.81$, $p = 0.077$). Confidence was the only trait in which Speaker B was rated slightly higher, though this difference was small and not significant ($t(43) = 0.96$, $p = 0.34$, $d = 0.14$).

It is worth noting that a negative *t*-statistic and Cohen's *d* simply indicate the direction of the effect; in other words, Speaker B was rated lower than Speaker A on that trait. In this study, negative values consistently pointed to less favorable evaluations of the English-mixed speaker. Together, these results suggest that while participants evaluated the two speakers similarly in the Mandarin-only condition, they consistently rated the English-inserting speaker less favorable in the English-mixed condition, especially on traits associated with interpersonal warmth and social fluency. These findings support the idea that English use in casual speech contexts may introduce a subtle social cost, rather than a symbolic advantage, across certain trait-based judgments.

6.2. Credibility and social interaction

Beyond personal traits, participants were also asked questions related to the speakers' perceived social reliability and contextual fit, such as how likely they would be to approach each speaker for help, and how appropriate each speaker seemed for formal versus informal engagement.

6.2.1. Help-seeking behavior

Table 4. ***Help-seeking behavior by condition***

Condition	Speaker A (Observed)	Speaker B (Observed)	Expected per speaker	$X^2(1)$	*p*	Significant?
Mandarin-only	21	24	22.5	0.20	0.65	No
English-mixed	37	7	22	20.45	< 0.000001	Yes

Note. Values reflect observed and expected frequencies under the assumption of equal preference. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were conducted separately for each condition. Significance was determined at $\alpha = 0.05$.

A visual summary is presented in Figure 2.

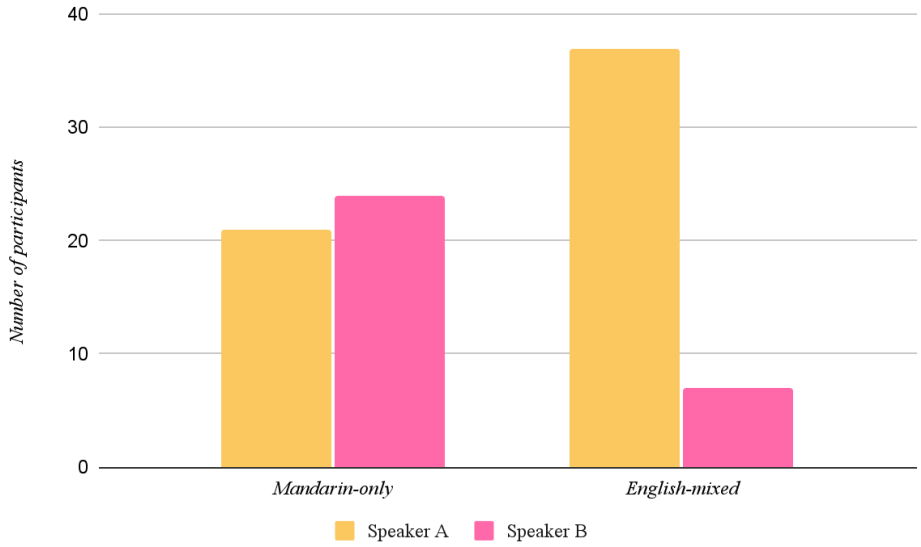

Fig 2. Help-seeking behavior by condition

Table 4 presents participants' responses to the behavioral question: *"If you needed help in a public setting, which speaker are you more likely to approach?"* Observed and expected counts are shown for both the Mandarin-only and English-mixed conditions, along with results from chi-square goodness-of-fit tests.

One key finding was that in the Mandarin-only condition, participants were nearly evenly split: 21 selected Speaker A and 24 selected Speaker B. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test showed no significant preference, $X^2(1, N = 45) = 0.20$, $p = 0.655$. This result reinforces earlier findings that when both speakers used only Mandarin, neither was perceived as more approachable than

the other. However, in the English-mixed condition, results diverged sharply. A total of 37 participants selected Speaker A, while only 7 chose Speaker B. This distribution was statistically significant, $X^2(1, N = 44) = 20.45$, $p < 0.0001$, indicating a strong reluctance to approach Speaker B for help in a public setting.

6.2.2. Willingness to interact

Table 5. ***Willingness to engage in formal contexts***

Condition	Context	Speaker A (M)	Speaker B (M)	Mean difference (B - A)	SD	*t*(df)	*p*	*d*	Sig?
Mandarin-only	Formal	3.02	2.93	-0.09	1.35	-0.44 (44)	0.66	-0.07	No
English-mixed	Formal	4.11	3.07	-1.05	1.40	-4.96 (43)	< 0.00001	-0.75	Yes
Mandarin-only	Informal	3.11	3.09	-0.02	1.62	-0.09 (44)	0.934	-0.01	No
English-mixed	Informal	3.61	2.91	-0.70	2.12	-2.21 (43)	0.033	-0.33	Yes

Note. Ratings reflect participants' willingness to engage with each speaker in formal and informal contexts , measured on a five-point Likert scale. *t*-values are from paired samples *t*-tests. SD refers to the standard deviation of paired difference scores. Significance was determined at $\alpha = 0.05$.

These results are visually summarized in Figure 3, which displays mean willingness ratings across both formal and informal contexts for each speaker in both conditions.

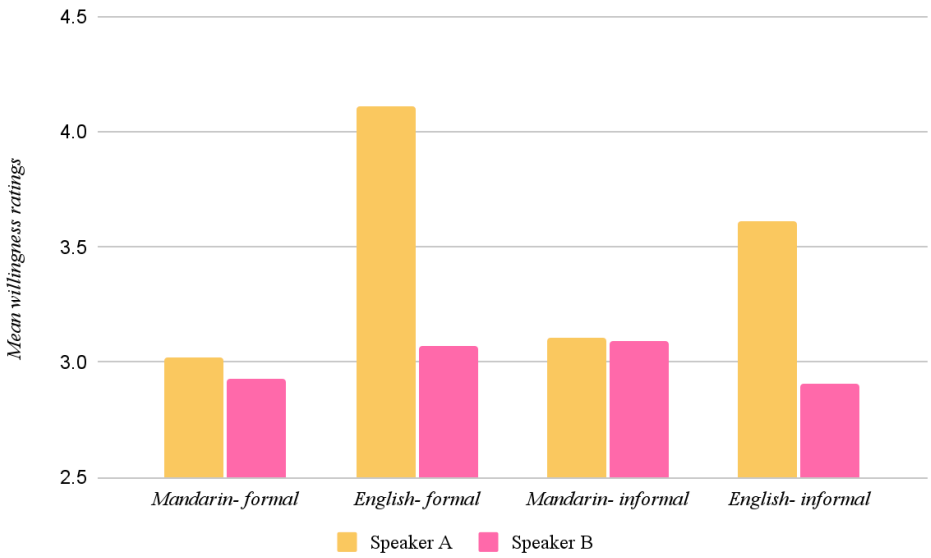

Figure 3. ***Mean willingness to engage with each speaker by context and condition***

Table 5 presents participants' willingness to interact with each speaker in formal and informal settings. In the Mandarin-only condition, no significant difference was found when participants were asked about their willingness to engage with each speaker in formal contexts. Speaker A (M = 3.02) and Speaker B (M = 2.93) received nearly identical ratings. A paired sample *t*-test confirmed the lack of significance, $t(44) = -0.44$, $p = 0.660$, with a negligible effect size ($d = -0.07$).In the English-mixed condition, however, a clearer preference emerged. Speaker A was rated significantly more favorably for formal engagement (M = 4.11) than Speaker B (M = 3.07), with a highly statistically significant difference $t(43) = -4.96$, $p < 0.001$, with a large effect size ($d = -0.75$). This pattern suggests that presence of English may have disrupted Speaker B's perceived credibility or relatability in more formal interaction settings.

In terms informal contexts, again, in the Mandarin-only condition, responses were nearly identical: Speaker A (M = 3.11) and Speaker B (M = 3.09) with no statistically significant difference, $t(44) = -0.09$, $p = 0.934$, and a negligible effect size ($d = -0.01$). In contrast, the English-mixed condition again revealed a preference for Speaker A. Participants rated Speaker A higher (M = 3.61) than Speaker B (M = 2.91), with a significant difference, $t(43) = -2.21$, $p = 0.033$, and a moderate effect size ($d = -0.33$). These results indicate that Speaker B's use of English not only affected formal perceptions, but also reduced willingness to engage in more casual, socially open interactions.

Overall, across help-seeking behavior, formal engagement, and informal engagement, the Mandarin-only condition produced consistently neutral results, with no significant preference for either speaker. In contrast, the English-mixed condition revealed a clear and consistent trend: participants were less likely to trust, approach, or engage with the speaker who used English in a casual conversation.

6.3. Perceived social status and influence

The final section of the questionnaire explored participants' assumptions about the speakers' social position. These included perceived educational attainment, likelihood of holding a high-paying job, and overall perceived social status. While the questions in the previous section showed significant differences between speakers in the English-mixed condition, the results from this section of the questionnaire were more mixed and did not yield statistically significant patterns overall.

6.3.1. Perceived education

Table 6. ***Perceived education judgments by condition***

Condition	Speaker A (Observed)	Speaker B (Observed)	Expected per speaker	$X^2(1)$	*p*	Significant?
Mandarin-only	10	33	21.5	12.30	0.0004	Yes
English-mixed	26	17	21.5	1.88	0.170	No

Note. Values reflect observed and expected frequencies under the assumption of equal preference. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were conducted separately for each condition. Significance was determined at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Table 6 summarizes participants' responses to the question of which speaker was perceived as having a higher level of education. These results are summarized in Figure 4, which shows how perceived education ratings differed between speakers and across language conditions.

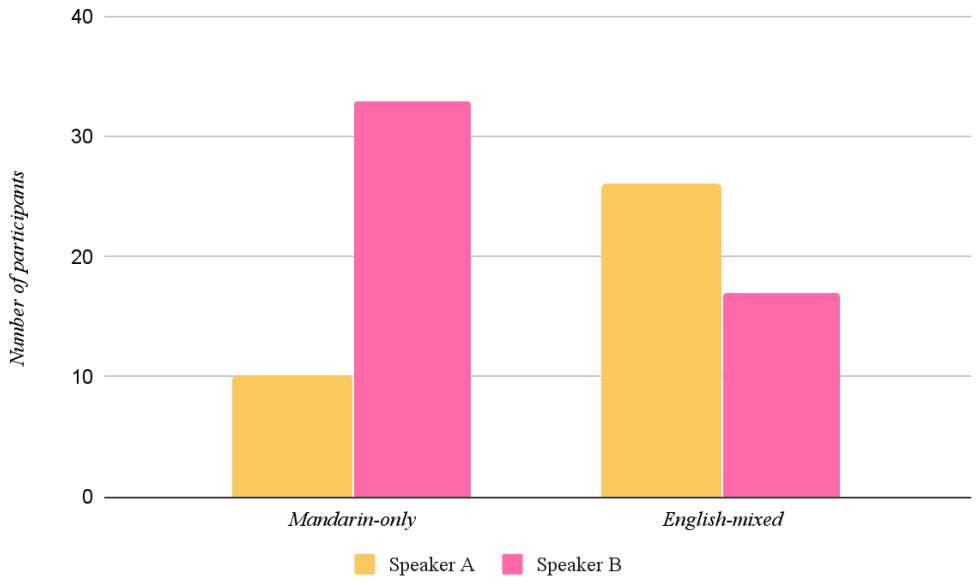

Figure 4. ***Perceived education by speaker and condition***

In the Mandarin-only condition, Speaker B was significantly more likely to be perceived as having a higher level of education compared to Speaker A. 33 participants selected Speaker B compared to 10 who selected Speaker A, $X^2(1, N = 43) = 12.30$, $p = 0.0005$. This suggests that, in the absence of English, Speaker B was more strongly associated with higher education attainment.

However, in the English-mixed condition, the difference in perceived education was not significant: 26 participants selected Speaker A, and 17 selected Speaker B. $X^2(1, N = 43) = 1.88$, $p = 0.170$. The trend favoring Speaker B in the Mandarin-only condition reversed, but without reaching statistical significance in the English-mixed condition.

It is important to note that Speaker B was a male voice, which may have influenced these perceptions. This gender-related effect will be explored in greater detail in the discussion, but it is acknowledged here as a plausible factor that may have contributed to the observed pattern.

6.3.2. Perceived professional income

Table 7. ***Perceived professional income judgments by condition***

Condition	Speaker A (Observed)	Speaker B (Observed)	Expected per speaker	$X^2(1)$	*p*	Significant?
Mandarin-only	21	21	21	0	1	No
English-mixed	22	21	21.5	0.02	0.879	No

Note. Values reflect observed and expected frequencies under the assumption of equal preference. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were conducted separately for each condition. Significance was determined at $\alpha = 0.05$.

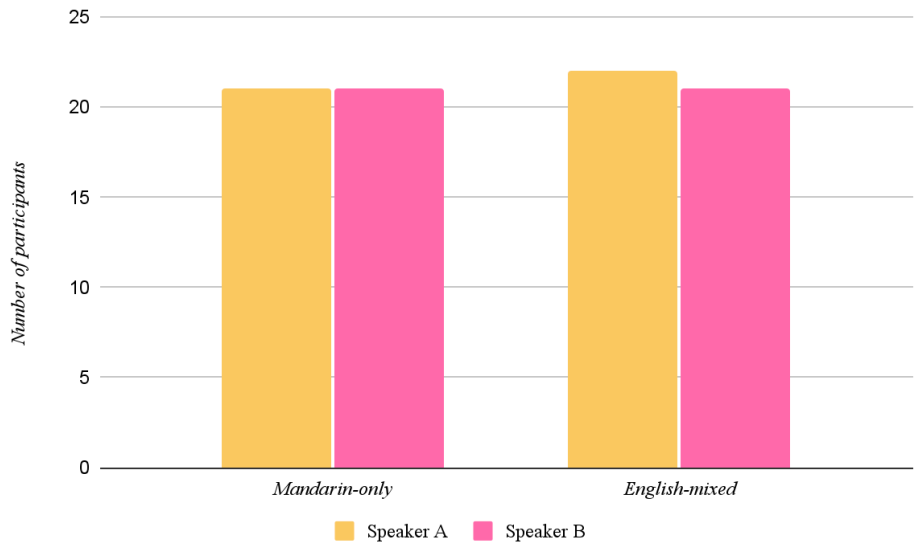

Figure 5. ***Perceived income by speaker and condition***

Table 7 presents participants' judgments of each speaker's perceived income. In both conditions, responses were evenly distributed. Figure 5 visualizes these results, showing the number of participants who associate higher income with each speaker across both conditions.

In the Mandarin-only condition, participants were split evenly (21 for each speaker), $X^2(1, N = 42) = 0.00$, $p = 1$. In the English-mixed condition, the distribution was similarly balanced (22 for Speaker A, 21 for Speaker B), $X^2(1, N = 43) = 0.02$, $p = 0.879$. These results suggest that English use did not significantly influence perceptions of professional income potential.

6.3.3. Overall perceived social status

Table 8. ***Overall perceived social status ratings by condition***

Condition	Speaker A (M)	Speaker B (M)	Mean difference (B - A)	SD	*t*(df)	*p*	*d*	Sig?
Mandarin-only	2.71	3.07	0.36	1.30	1.84 (44)	0.073	0.274	No
English-mixed	3.25	2.91	-0.34	1.36	-1.66 (43)	0.104	-0.25	No

Note. Values represent mean ratings and paired difference scores. *t*-values are from paired samples *t*-tests. SD refers to the standard deviation of paired difference scores. Significance was determined at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Table 8 presents participants' evaluations of each speaker's overall social status. Participants were asked to evaluate each speaker's overall social status using a five-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from relatively low social background to very high elite status, with descriptions referencing access to social resources, education, professional opportunities, and broader societal influence.

In the Mandarin-only condition, Speaker B received slightly higher ratings (M = 3.07) than Speaker A (M = 2.71), although this difference did not reach statistical significance ($p = 0.07$, $d = 0.27$). In the English-mixed condition, the pattern reversed: Speaker A received higher ratings (M = 3.25) compared to Speaker B (M = 2.91), though again the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.104$, $d = -0.25$). Figure 6 illustrates these findings.

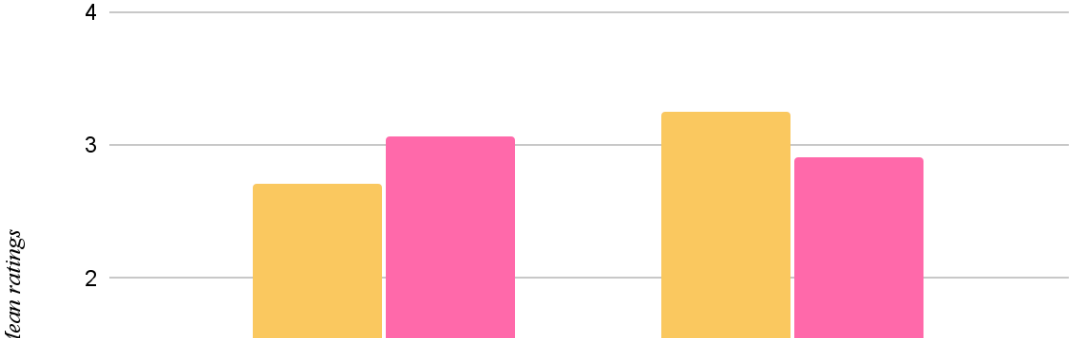

Figure 6. ***Mean perceived social status rating by speaker and condition.***

These patterns suggest a small but noticeable shift in participants' perceptions depending on whether English was used. In the Mandarin-only condition, Speaker B was slightly favored in terms of social status, consistent with earlier findings that associated Speaker B with higher educational attainment. In the English-mixed condition, however, Speaker A was more favorably rated, suggesting that the presence of English may have weakened Speaker B's social standing in participants' perceptions, even if the difference was not statistically robust.

7. Discussion

This study examined how the presence of English words and phrases in an informal Mandarin conversation shaped listener evaluations of speakers across interpersonal traits, willingness to interact, and perceived social status. The following sections will first discuss the impact of English use on interpersonal warmth and social approachability, before turning to their effects on perceived social status and broader cultural capital.

7.1. Trait-based evaluations and interpersonal warmth

While English has traditionally been associated with institutional prestige, educational attainment, and upward mobility in China (e.g, Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Hu & McKay, 2012; Lin, 2014, 2018; Pan & Block, 2011; Qi, 2016), the present findings suggest that these symbolic values do not consistently transfer into informal, everyday interactions. Rather than uniformly enhancing the speaker's image, English use appeared to introduce patterns of social distancing and reduced emotional accessibility.

Participants consistently rated Speaker B lower on traits such as affability, intelligence, and modernity (see **Figure 1**). These findings are especially notable because the traits affected– affability, intelligence, and modernity– while often treated as abstract evaluative categories, can carry important implications in casual conversation. Research in social psychology identifies affability as a core dimension of social judgment, closely aligned with warmth and trustworthiness, both of which are foundational to approachability (Fiske et al., 2007). Research has also shown that intelligence and modernity often serve as proxy traits for cultural fluency, education attainment, and cosmopolitan sophistication, especially in contexts where language use is symbolically tied to global modernity (Pan & Block, 2011; Piller, 2001). However, in informal social settings, these very traits that award prestige in institutional contexts may reduce perceived

emotional accessibility or relatability. In this case, the presence of English words and phrases into otherwise natural Mandarin conversation may have disrupted listeners' expectations for interpersonal warmth, shifting attention away from relational ease and toward symbolic display. Thus, the speaker who used English may have been perceived as less emotionally available and less culturally attuned to the interactional norms of the informal setting.

This interpretation is further reinforced by behavioral data. In the Mandarin-only condition, participants showed no significant preference between the two speakers when asked whom they would approach for help. However, in the English-mixed condition, this shifted dramatically: 37 out of 44 participants preferred Speaker A, indicating a strong reluctance to engage with the English-using speaker (see **Figure 2**). This pattern suggests that something about Speaker B's use of English made them feel less approachable. An important point to note is that this behavioral question did not ask about intelligence, education, or competence. It focused purely on trust and comfort. The results here seem to suggest that in informal public settings, the use of English words and phrases appeared to disrupt participants' sense of social closeness, reinforcing the earlier pattern observed in trait evaluations: that English use, in casual conversations, may create a sense of social distance rather than increasing approachability.

This dynamic can be further understood through Bourdieu's (1977) concept of language as symbolic power. As a specific form of cultural capital, linguistic resources gain value only when they are recognized as legitimate within a given social field (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, language use is not evaluated in isolation, but through the lens of social expectations and recognition. In this study, Speaker B's use of English may have conflicted with the norms of the informal setting, which ultimately undermined the symbolic recognition typically required for trust, warmth, or social closeness to form.

Interestingly, willingness to interact across both formal and informal engagement settings shows a similar divergence. Participants maintained their preference for Speaker A across both formal and informal contexts (see **Figure 3**). Although English is typically associated with professionalism and competence, participants still rated Speaker A as significantly more desirable for both formal and informal interactions in the English mixed condition. This pattern suggests that participants were not simply responding to an abstract "formal setting" prompt. Instead, they may have projected whether each speaker could successfully transition into formal contexts based on what they heard. Therefore, Speaker B's English use may have signaled not

professionalism, but emotional or cultural misalignment. Speaker B might have been perceived by participants as someone simultaneously too distant for casual rapport but also too performative to be trusted in formal exchanges.

However, it must also be noted that participants made these projections based on hearing only a single informal conversation. The imaginative leap required to assess formal appropriateness potentially introduces some variability, as participants' individual interpretations may have varied. Nonetheless, the strength and statistical consistency of the pattern suggest that the social mismatch introduced by English use was salient across listeners.

These findings are especially striking when contrasted with the dominant findings in the literature. In formal settings such as education and professional advancement, English is widely viewed as an essential resource for gaining access to prestigious institutions and high-status opportunities (e.g. Dou et al., 2024; Pan & Block, 2011; Qi, 2016). As previously discussed in the literature review, English proficiency is often framed as a form of institutionalized capital tied to academic achievement, professional success, and international competitiveness (Dou et al., 2024; He & Li, 2021; Lin, 2014; Qi, 2016). However, the present study suggests that when transplanted into an informal interpersonal setting, these associations may lose their symbolic resonance, and potentially even provoke discomfort.

As Liu et al. (2023) observe, the symbolic value of English in China is largely sustained through its role in elite schooling and professional advancement. However, outside of these institutional contexts, that symbolic value might not hold. Framed through Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) theory, these results suggest that English use introduced a mismatch between the speaker's language performance and the social expectations of the field. In formal institutional contexts, English is recognized as high-status capital; but in casual interpersonal interactions, it may be perceived as unnecessary or even distancing, reducing social trust rather than enhancing it. English may carry prestige, but it appears that its symbolic power is not absolute and is dependent on its alignment with the social logic of the setting. Thus, cultural capital– linguistic or otherwise– derives its power from social recognition within a specific field. Its value is not just dependent on possession, but on recognition. When the recognition fails to materialize, the same behaviors or resources that grant prestige in one context may be disregarded, or even penalized, in another.

7.2. Perceived social status and the conditional value of English

While interpersonal warmth and approachability were clearly affected by the presence of English, the results related to social status were more mixed. Participants were asked to evaluate each speaker's education level, professional prospects, and overall social standing. These questions were designed to assess whether English use would trigger associations with institutional prestige, as often reported in studies on educational and workplace hierarchies (e.g., Hu & McKay, 2012; Lin, 2014, 2018; Pan & Block, 2011).

Starting with perceived education, there was a clear and statistically significant difference in the Mandarin-only condition: Speaker B, the male voice, was overwhelmingly rated as more educated (see **Figure 4**). This result likely reflects broader social patterns in which men are often perceived as more competent, authoritative, and higher-status (Brescoll, 2011; Carli, 1990; Ridgeway, 2002). In this Mandarin-only condition, Speaker B's default social capital, including gender and possibly vocal tone, likely helped him come across as more educated or prestigious.

However, in the English-mixed condition, this perceived advantage participants awarded Speaker B with disappeared (see **Figure 4**). Despite using a language traditionally associated with prestige and elite status in China, Speaker B was no longer perceived as more educated than Speaker A. In fact, although the difference was not statistically significant, Speaker A was selected slightly more often. This reversal suggests that English use may have disrupted the automatic recognition of Speaker B's presumed educational capital. As with other measures of interpersonal perception, the English phrases may have triggered a sense of mismatch between what was expected and what was actually performed.

According to Bourdieu's (1986) framework, cultural capital is only effective when it aligns with the logic of the field. Here, the use of English in an informal conversational setting may have misaligned with participants' expectations, thereby disrupting the validation process that typically grants English, and by extension, the speaker, symbolic prestige. While Speaker B held English as a possession, the social field did not recognize or reward this performance, with without recognition, the value of capital was lost.

Perceptions of income and overall social standing followed similar trends (see **Figure 5** and **Figure 6**). No statistically significant differences were found between speakers in either condition, and small fluctuations in favor of one speaker or the other appeared inconsistent. While Speaker B's education was initially recognized in the Mandarin-only condition, this

recognition did not carry over into assumptions about wealth or elite background, even once English was introduced. This again suggests that listeners did not consistently map English use onto assumptions about status. This contrasts with the findings of prior workplace-focused research, where English is seen as crucial for career advancement and competitive access to professional opportunities (Dou et al., 2024; He & Li, 2021). In the informal domain of everyday conversation, the symbolic pathways that typically connect English to professional success appeared disrupted or irrelevant.

Together, these findings point to an important conclusion: while English continues to operate as a form of cultural capital in China, its symbolic power is highly contingent on context. It is most effective when embedded within institutional fields that explicitly reward linguistic proficiency, such as academic settings or international corporate environments. In more fluid, informal spaces, where emotional resonance, authenticity, and shared norms dominate, the same resource may not only fail to grant advantage but may actively reduce a speaker's appeal.

These results reinforce Bourdieu's (1986) insight that cultural capital is relational, not absolute. It requires social recognition, contextual legitimacy, and alignment with the values of the field. As this study has shown, in the casual rhythms of everyday speech, the value it carries in certain domains can quickly dissolve.

8. Conclusion and future directions

8.1. Conclusion

This study investigated whether the symbolic power of English in China, long established in institutional settings such as education and employment (e.g., Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Hu & McKay, 2012; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002), extends into informal everyday interactions. By examining listener evaluations of Mandarin-only versus English-mixed conversations, the findings reveal that English's prestige is highly context-dependent. Rather than enhancing perceptions of competence or status, English use often reduced interpersonal warmth, emotional accessibility, and social desirability.

Participants consistently rated the English-using speaker lower in traits such as affability, intelligence, and modernity, and were significantly less willing to approach or interact with him across both formal and informal scenarios. Even when participants were asked to imagine formal interactions, which are contexts where English is typically seen as prestigious, the speaker's English usage appeared to reduce participants' willingness to engage. These results suggest that

listeners do not evaluate linguistic choices in isolation; instead, they interpret it relative to the interactional tone and social expectations of the field.

At the level of perceived social status, including education, income, and background prestige, results were more mixed. Although the English-using speaker was initially perceived as more educated in the Mandarin-only condition, likely due in part to gendered expectations, this advantage disappeared once English words and phrases were introduced. This reversal further highlights the context-dependent nature of English's symbolic value: when linguistic performance misaligns with the social field, even privileged resources such as English may lose its capital.

Ultimately, the findings highlight that cultural capital, particularly expressed through language, derives its power not from the resource itself, but from its recognition within a given context. While English holds clear symbolic value in formal domains such as education and professional advancement, this prestige does not straightforwardly extend to casual, everyday interactions. In fact, it may clash with expectations of emotional warmth, relational ease, and cultural alignment. In casual Mandarin-dominant settings, where emotional warmth, cultural alignment, and relational ease are prioritized, English disrupted these expectations, therefore diminishing rather than enhancing the speaker's appeal. Overall, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how English operated as cultural capital in China; not as an automatic marker of prestige, but as a socially situated resource whose value fluctuates across different interactional contexts.

8.2. Future directions

While this study offers useful insights into how the presence of English affects social perceptions in casual speech in China, several limitations should be acknowledged, both in terms of study design and participant background.

First, Speaker B, the speaker who delivered English words and phrases, was voiced by a male speaker whose natural delivery was more expressive and arguably more performative in tone. This stylistic difference, along with the fixed pairing of speaker role and gender, may have influenced listener perceptions independently of the language switch. In particular, Speaker B's delivery may have been more animated or assertive, which could have shaped participants' impressions of warmth, sincerity, or approachability, especially in an informal interaction where modesty or emotional softness might be implicitly expected. While this was not a deliberate

manipulation, it raises the possibility that listeners responded not only to language use, but also to tone, pacing, and vocal energy. In the future, it would be extremely valuable to have a more rigorous study design that counterbalances speaker roles and match vocal affect to more clearly isolate the impact of English use alone.

Second, participant recruitment was limited to individuals within my relatives and their social circles. As a result, the sample likely skewed toward participants of similar socioeconomic backgrounds, which may have affected how they interpreted or responded to the presence of English (Liu et al., 2023). A broader participant pool, stratified by region and class, could offer more insight into how language attitudes vary across different demographic groups.

Thirdly, all participants in the study were from northern China, where Mandarin is the dominant language (Ramsey, 1987). This may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions of China, particularly areas where Mandarin is not the home or community language. In southern provinces, where local languages like Cantonese and Hakka are widely spoken, both Mandarin and English may carry different symbolic associations (Ramsey, 1987). The use of English in conversation may not be evaluated the same way if Mandarin itself is already perceived as a more formal code. Additionally, regional variation in communication norms, such as expectation of tone, formality, or emotional expression, may lead to different listener judgments of the same speech. As discussed earlier, Zeng et al. (2022) provide further evidence that regional linguistic environments influence language attitudes and communicative expectations. Future research could explore how regional language hierarchies and cultural norms influence the perception of English within Mandarin speech across difference sociolinguistic settings.

Together, these limitations point to the importance of speaker variability, participant diversity, and linguistic context in shaping the meaning of English in contemporary Chinese discourse. Future research should aim to account for these variables to clarify when and how English functions as cultural and symbolic capital, and when it may instead signal distance, unfamiliarity, or misalignment.

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Appendix A. *Mandarin dialogue*

A：我平时没有什么特别大的兴趣爱好
A：呃 一般周末可能就是啊 睡一个懒觉或者做一些运动譬如爬山啊 跑步啊
A：呃... 诸如此类的吧
A：或者就是去电影院看电影这种的... 嗯...

B：嗯 好的
B：你看过的 就是你 你最近看过的一部电影是什么

A：嗯... 我想一下
A：上周末我去电影院看的一部电影
A：是一个悬疑片
A：但是我不记得叫什么了
A：嗯 哦 但是是一部印度的电影
A：呃... 但是我不记得影片的名字哦
A：不过还挺好看的

B：嗯， 挺好的

A：你呢 你上周末做什么？

B：嗯... 我去了 嗯... 九龙湾
B：去看一个展
B：嗯... 是一个画展 关于 啊 梵高
B：一些.. 他的画作... 嗯
B：之后我就去了商场
B：挺大的 在九龙湾
B：嗯
B：有宜家
B：嗯
B：呃 还有很多饭店
B：呃 我在那儿吃了川菜

Appendix B. *English-mixed Mandarin dialogue*

A：我平时没有什么特别大的兴趣爱好
A：呃 一般周末可能就是啊 睡一个懒觉或者做一些运动譬如爬山啊 跑步啊
A：呃... 诸如此类的吧
A：或者就是去电影院看电影这种的... 嗯...

B：嗯 好的
B：你看过的 就是你 你最近看过的一部**movie**是什么

A：嗯... 我想一下
A：上周末我去电影院看的一部电影
A：是一个悬疑片
A：但是我不记得叫什么了
A：嗯 哦 但是是一部印度的电影
A：呃... 但是我不记得影片的名字哦
A：不过还挺好看的

B：嗯，**good**

A：你呢 你上周末做什么？

B：um…
B：**I went to** um… 九龙湾
B：**For an exhibition**
B：**Um it's an art exhibition about** 啊 梵高
B：**Some..** 他的画作
B：嗯
B：**After that I went to Megabox**
B：它是一个非常大的**shopping mall**
B：在九龙湾
B：um
B：有宜家
B：嗯 还有很多**restaurants**
B：呃 我在那里吃了川菜

Appendix C. ***Translation of conversation script***

A: I don't really have any major hobbies.
A: Uh… usually on weekends, I might sleep in or do some exercise– like hiking, running, things like that.
A: Or I'll go to the movies or something… yeah…

B: Mm, okay.
B: What's a movie you've seen recently?

A: Uh… let me think.
A: Last weekend I went to the movies.
A: It was a thriller.
A: But I don't remember the name of it, though.
A: But it was pretty good.

B: Mm, nice.

A: What about you? What did you do last weekend?

B: Uh… I went to, um… Kowloon Bay.
B: To see an exhibit.
B: Um… it was an art exhibit about, uh, Van Gogh.
B: Some of.. his paintings… year.
B: Then I went to the mall.
B: It's pretty big, in Kowloon Bay.
B: Mm.
B: There's an IKEA.
B: Mm.
B: Uh, and a lot of restaurants.
B: Uh… I had Sichuan food there.

Appendix D. *Questionnaire*

人物特征

Q1：您觉得说话人A：

- 亲和力如何（1 = 完全不亲和，5 = 非常亲和）
- 有多自信（1 = 非常不自信，5 = 非常自信）
- 思维能力如何（1 = 不太敏锐，5 = 极其敏锐）
- 学识水平如何（1 = 很少接触知识，5 = 博学多识）
- 有多时尚/现代（1 = 过时，5 = 前卫）

Q2：您觉得说话人B：

- 亲和力如何（1 = 完全不亲和，5 = 非常亲和）
- 有多自信（1 = 非常不自信，5 = 非常自信）
- 思维能力如何（1 = 不太敏锐，5 = 极其敏锐）
- 学识水平如何（1 = 很少接触知识，5 = 博学多识）
- 有多时尚/现代（1 = 过时，5 = 前卫）

可信度与社交活动

Q3：如果您在公共场合需要帮助，您会更倾向向哪位说话人寻求帮助？

Q4：在正式场合（如工作或课堂），您有多大可能会选择与说话人A交谈（1 = 完全不会选择交谈，5 = 非常可能选择交谈）？

Q5：在非正式场合（如朋友聚会），您有多大可能会选择与说话人A交谈（1 = 完全不会选择交谈，5 = 非常可能选择交谈）？

Q6：在正式场合（如工作或课堂），您有多大可能会选择与说话人B交谈（1 = 完全不会选择交谈，5 = 非常可能选择交谈）？

Q7：在非正式场合（如朋友聚会），您有多大可能会选择与说话人B交谈（1 = 完全不会选择交谈，5 = 非常可能选择交谈）？

社会地位与影响力

Q8：您觉得哪位说话人的学历更高？

Q9：您觉得哪位说话人更可能从事高薪职业？

Q10：您在多大程度上同意以下说法："说话人A可能属于精英阶层，拥有较高的社会地位，例如接受过良好的教育、拥有体面的工作机会、具备一定人脉，或可能拥有显著的社会影响力。"（1 = 非常不同意，2 = 不同意，3 = 一般，4 = 同意，5 = 非常同意）

Q11：您在多大程度上同意以下说法："说话人B可能属于精英阶层，拥有较高的社会地位，例如接受过良好的教育、拥有体面的工作机会、具备一定人脉，或可能拥有显著的社会影响力。"（1 = 非常不同意，2 = 不同意，3 = 一般，4 = 同意，5 = 非常同意）

Appendix E. ***Translation of questionnaire***

Speaker traits

Q1：How would you rate Speaker A on the following traits?

- Affability（1 = not at all， 5 = very）
- Confidence（1 = not at all， 5 = very）
- Intelligence（1 = not at all， 5 = very）
- Education（1 = not at all， 5 = very）
- Modernity（1 = not at all， 5 = very）

Q2：How would you rate Speaker B on the following traits?

- Affability（1 = not at all， 5 = very）
- Confidence（1 = not at all， 5 = very）
- Intelligence（1 = not at all， 5 = very）
- Knowledge level（1 = not at all， 5 = very）
- Modernity（1 = not at all， 5 = very）

Trustworthiness and social engagement

Q3：If you needed help in a public settings, which speaker are you most likely to approach？

Q4：In a formal setting (e.g., work or a classroom), how likely are you to engage in conversation with Speaker A (1 = very unlikely to choose to engage, 5 = very likely to choose to engage)？

Q5：In an informal setting (e.g., gathering with friends), how likely are you to engage in conversation with Speaker A (1 = very unlikely to choose to engage, 5 = very likely to choose to engage)？

Q6：In a formal setting (e.g., work or a classroom), how likely are you to engage in conversation with Speaker B (1 = very unlikely to choose to engage, 5 = very likely to choose to engage)？

Q7：In an informal setting (e.g., gathering with friends), how likely are you to engage in conversation with Speaker B (1 = very unlikely to choose to engage, 5 = very likely to choose to engage)？

Social status and influence

Q8：Which speaker do you think has a higher level of education？

Q9：Which speaker do you think is more likely to have a higher paying job？

Q10：To what extent might you agree with the following statement: “Speaker A may belong to the elite class and possess a high social status, e.g., having received a good education, holding a respectable job, having social connections, or possession significant social influence”（1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree）

Q11：To what extent might you agree with the following statement: “Speaker B may belong to the elite class and possess a high social status, e.g., having received a good education, holding a respectable job, having social connections, or possession significant social influence”（1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree）