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Loving from afar: Japanese language learners and their imagined target language communities in contemporary Hong Kong

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Abstract: Research has shown that Japanese language learners in Hong Kong are affectively rather than instrumentally motivated. Put simply, they tend to learn Japanese because they like people or things associated with Japan(ese). To better understand their affection for Japan(ese), I explore how Japanese language learners' imagined target language communities shape their symbolic investments in Japanese and Japanese-speaking cultural identities in contemporary Hong Kong. To this end, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 18 ethnic Chinese Hong Kong learners of Japanese. After data analysis, three main themes emerged: "symbolic investment", "perceived marginalisation", and "voluntary peripheralisation". My findings suggest that these Japanese language learners make diverse and personalised symbolic investments in exchange for valuable intangibles, particularly security and well-being. While they perceive themselves as marginalised from imagined Japanese-speaking communities, they also tend to remain voluntarily on the periphery of such imagined Japanese-speaking communities to construct positive Japanese-speaking (but non-Japanese) cultural identities and to secure their imagined "Japan" as a safe haven from the difficult realities of Hong Kong. These learners of Japanese thus see their "Japan" as imagined "foreign" communities to which they do not want or need to fully belong. I conclude this paper with useful implications for researchers and educators.

Keywords: imagined community; cultural identity; symbolic investment; foreign language learning; Japanese

1 Introduction

I interviewed participant John – a doctor in his 40s – immediately after Hong Kong lifted all pandemic-related travel restrictions in April 2023. John expressed his

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excitement at being able to travel to Japan in a month's time. "Do you know how long I've been waiting? I really love Japan". Born and raised in Hong Kong and partly educated in the United Kingdom, John has been studying Japanese since 2013 and holds the second highest (N2) qualification of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT). John was also enthusiastic about his learning. "My former teacher is coming back to the [language] school. I like her teaching". John even considered moving to Japan around 2017 but decided against it. "I'm waiting to see how things go here [in Hong Kong]". When I asked him why, John looked helpless. "If I lived in Japan, I'd always be treated like an outsider". He then went on to describe Japan with a trope. "Japan is an exclusive club [that is] hard to get into. But on the positive side, being so exclusive may be good for protecting Japan's attractive cultural uniqueness".

Research has shown that Japanese language learners in Hong Kong tend to be affectively motivated by "a general *liking* for the people and cultural products associated with the target language" (Humphreys and Miyazoe-Wong 2007: 472, emphasis mine; for similar findings, see also Humphreys and Spratt 2008; Nomura and Yuan 2019; Nomura et al. 2019; Seo 2011). Since the "social turn" (Block 2003) in applied linguistics, language learners have been increasingly seen "as part of an inclusive social world" (Tajeddin et al. 2023: 893). As a socially situated alternative to the psychological concept of "motivation", Norton (1995) proposes the notion of "investment", which "carries connotations of [learners'] hopes of returns and benefits" (Kramsch 2013: 195) from their language learning. Norton (1995, 2001, 2013) views investments in a target language as the socio-economic actions of its learners in search of a wider range of symbolic and material resources. Hong Kong learners' investment in Japanese can be understood as more symbolic than material, stemming primarily from their attachment to symbolic resources associated with Japan rather than from material benefits derived from Japanese.[1] Indeed, such investment involves intangible symbolic resources such as social ethics (e. g. civility, empathy), which Hong Kong Chinese who learn Japanese associate not only with Japan but also vaguely with ancient China (Nomura and Yuan 2019). Most likely, learning Japanese in Hong Kong may also involve a learner's "cultural identity", defined as "the relationship between individuals and members of a group who share a common history, a common language and similar ways of understanding the world" (Norton 2013: 56).[2]

1 Seo (2011) also suggests that Hong Kong learners who study Japanese at a lifelong learning institute are attracted not only to enjoying Japanese cultural products, but also to networking with other Hong Kong learners of Japanese and helping friends who do not speak Japanese with their knowledge of Japanese.

2 Norton (2013) distinguishes cultural identity from "social identity", defined as "the relationship between the individual and the larger social world as mediated through institutions such as families, schools, workplaces, social services, and law courts" (p. 56), although the boundary between the two constructs is fluid.

Cultural identity typically refers to a person's association with their heritage language and culture (e. g. Schecter and Bayley 1997). And yet, cultural identity can also refer to how language learners seek to belong to the cultures beneath their target languages, despite the risk of discounting "the heterogeneity within the [cultural] groups" (Norton 2013: 56).

I argue that contemporary Hong Kong Chinese learners of Japanese want and need something deeper and more complex than a mere taste for tangible cultural objects. Their "symbolic investments", defined as learners' desire and need to acquire intangible symbolic resources such as language skills, academic credentials, social networks, and religious beliefs (Norton 1995, 2001, 2013) – as well as, in my view, security and well-being – are inextricably linked with Japan, the only nation that speaks their target language as its national language. What I tease out in this article is how Hong Kong learners of Japanese conceive of "imagined communities" (Kanno 2008; Kanno and Norton 2003; Norton 2001; Tajeddin et al. 2023) through which they pursue security, well-being, and other valuable intangibles through symbolic investment in Japanese and construct Japanese-speaking cultural identities as their modes of participation (or non-participation) in such imagined Japanese-speaking communities. Despite the challenge of defining "imagined communities" in applied linguistics, Norton (2013) sees them as settings in which language learners' imaginations create a sense of belonging to target language communities that are not always easily accessible but that they may be able to join in the future. Such a definition has a wobbly and unwieldy focus on the future without a legacy that marks the past (e. g. memories, monarchs, monuments), which partly explains why imagined communities remain a growing yet unploughed field in applied linguistics (Tajeddin et al. 2023).

Hong Kong is a postcolonial society with many residents still uncertain about their belonging to the Chinese nation (Lee and Chan 2024; Lui 2020). Hong Kong is also a linguistic enclave within China, with Cantonese (rather than Mandarin) retaining its status as the region's dominant language. Given ethnic Chinese Hongkongers' uneasy relationship with the imagined community that they are destined to join (i. e. modern China), their imagined Japanese-speaking communities may also have an impact on their fluid cultural identities. In post-war Hong Kong – where the British monarch left in 1997 – imagined Japanese-speaking communities may be more memorable, monumental, and therefore more imaginable than those of other foreign languages, because of the long-term massive symbolic and material influence of Japan (Consulate-General of Japan in Hong Kong 2022; Nakano 2002, 2009). The imagined communities of Japanese language learners and their impact on symbolic investments and cultural identities towards Japan in contemporary Hong Kong deserve attention to close a knowledge gap on the role of imagined communities in foreign language learning. Such imagined Japan-related, Japanese-speaking

communities presumably force them to consciously and skilfully manage their modes of participation (or non-participation), thereby shaping their life trajectories – especially their symbolic investments and cultural identities – as ethnic Chinese Hongkongers learning Japanese. Indeed, there are seemingly contradictory facets to John's trope: (a) his passionate symbolic investment in Japanese in the name of "love", (b) his imagined Japanese-speaking community as "an exclusive club", and (c) his Japanese-speaking cultural identity as "an outsider". Thus, I contextualise the role of Japanese language learning in contemporary Hong Kong through in-depth qualitative interviews, using imagined communities as a theoretical lens. This study revolves around the following research question: How do Japanese language learners' imagined communities shape their symbolic investments and cultural identities in contemporary Hong Kong?

2 Theoretical underpinnings

Nationalism is, according to Anderson (2006), is a result of discriminatory policies that forbade creole bureaucrats born in the Americas to work in the Spanish metropole and destined them to remain in the colonies of their birth. These creoles, confined to each colony, gradually imagined "[mostly unknown, unseen, unheard] fellow-members […] of their communion" (Anderson 2006: 6), giving rise to the Spanish-speaking nations of the Americas. While "national print-languages" (Anderson 2006: 67) served as a primary catalyst for nationhood, Spanish, English, and other colonial languages did not play as important a role in the "New World" as they did in the "Old World", where such national languages belonged to "each language's native speakers" (Anderson 2006: 71). Although Anderson (2006) does not provide a comprehensive analysis of "foreign" language learning, he attests to the power of language to create an imagined community and solidarity among its members. In Asia, Japan is a successful example of such nation-building. By suppressing regional vernaculars, nationalism invented a Japanese "language" – a *kokugo* 'national language' – that belonged exclusively to "Japan" and its people and was later imposed on its colonies such as Korea and Taiwan (Lee 2009). All these ideological enterprises were aimed at imagining Japan as a singular nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Japanese thus contributed to the construction and later expansion of the modern Japanese nation. No imagined community can exist without (also imagined) comrades and strangers, and one may need to imagine other nations as passionately as one imagines one's own (Anderson 2006). In due course, Japanese language learners associate Japanese with the nation of Japan, where – unlike anywhere else – Japanese is imagined as the only national language.

Anderson (2006) coined the term "imagined communities" to explain how nations have taken root in modern people's minds primarily through national print-languages. Drawing on his influential term, Kanno and Norton (2003) and other applied linguists have discussed how language learners construct their identities as future members of the (inevitably) imagined communities to which they want or need to belong. More than two decades have passed since Norton's (2001) seminal work, but research on imagined communities in applied linguistics has primarily discussed second language learners (e. g. Gao 2012) and heritage language learners (e. g. Haneda 2005). Second language and heritage language learners tend to question how to align their cultural identities with their new or old nations. In contrast, the relationship between foreign language learners and imagined communities is less imaginable and therefore less explored (Kubota 2011).

Admittedly, foreign language learning is not as epistemologically "deep" as national identity, be it legal or cultural. Anderson's (2006) theory of nationalism concerns almost everyone who must have a nationality in this late modernity. It is not surprising that an adult Chinese citizen speaks fluent Japanese, but it is inconceivable that the same person holds a Japanese passport.[3] Quite apart from Anderson's (2006) original argument, Norton (2001) employs the concept of imagined communities to portray the confused identities of two immigrant women learning English, who are not yet part of their imagined communities in anglophone Canada. While both learners of English attempted to fit into mainstream English-speaking society in their own ways, they committed non-participation in English language lessons because their teachers did not respect the imagined communities to which these women wished to belong. Worse, although both women invested time and effort in learning English, more experienced (and proficient) members of their imagined English-speaking communities stood in the way of their "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave and Wenger 1991). Drawing on Wenger (1998), Norton (2001) distinguishes "peripherality" – which can facilitate novice participants' fuller participation in their imagined communities – from "marginality" – which prevents novice participants from moving from the periphery to the centre of their imagined communities. "Non-participation was not an opportunity for learning from a position of peripherality, but an act of resistance from a position of marginality" (Norton 2001: 165), as these immigrant women embodied.

By focusing on educational institutions rather than individual language learners, Kanno (2008) reconciles Anderson's (2006) explanation on nation-building

3 The Japanese law basically prohibits adult Japanese citizens from holding multiple nationalities. Non-citizens can apply for a Japanese passport after renouncing their original nationality and completing the legal process of *kika* 'naturalisation'. See Roberts (2018) on Japanese immigration policy, which carefully avoids the term *imin* 'immigrant/immigration'.

and Norton's (2001) interpretation of immigrant language learning. Through her research with bilingual children in six different schools in Japan, Kanno (2008) reveals that "schools create unequal access to bilingualism by envisioning different imagined communities for bilingual students of different socioeconomic classes" (p. 3). Institutionally imagined communities also directed bilingual children into such communities, thus reproducing a society-wide disparity of "capital" (Bourdieu 1987). According to Kanno (2008), underprivileged newcomer children in public primary schools were only allowed to imagine the narrowest imagined communities and consider the fewest identity options. She then concludes her monograph with an observation about the monolingual imagined community of Japan. "Either they [i. e. underprivileged newcomer children] can grow up to be monolingual Japanese speakers and become members of Japanese society, *or* they can maintain their L1 and eventually return to their own country – but not both" (Kanno 2008: 178, emphasis in original), stuck in restricted life options.

As noted above, applied linguistic research on imagined communities is more compatible with immigrants and their descendants. While newcomers need to acquire the dominant languages of the societies to which they have migrated as their second languages, oldcomers are often expected to maintain skills in their heritage languages. In Hong Kong, for example, Gao (2012) discusses the region's South Asian newcomer children and their Chinese language teachers, who spoke Cantonese as their first language. These South Asian students committed non-participation in their Chinese language classrooms and Hong Kong's imagined Chinese-speaking community, othering them as "linguistically deficient […] non-native speakers" (Gao 2012: 144). In Haneda (2005), Jim – a Japanese Canadian boy – felt excluded whenever he visited Japan. Jim went to a Saturday school to keep up his Japanese skills to "please his parents" (p. 277). Back in Japan, however, he was ridiculed as "a strange fellow" (Haneda 2005: 278) who looked Japanese but was not Japanese. Jim gradually diminished his cultural identity as a member of his ancestral nation.

Imagined communities are less explored in foreign language learning, reflecting the challenge for many foreign language learners to imagine their target language communities without pressing survival concerns (Kubota 2011). Exceptionally, Brown (2018) finds that Japanese university students learning English as a foreign language associated themselves with two imagined communities: (a) the Japanese nation and (b) "a sub-set of the larger imagined community of Japanese people" (p. 398), within which his participants formed cultural identities as Japanese speakers of English. While these Japanese university students located Japanese within their nation-bound imagined community, English was exclusively associated with the outside world beyond the boundaries of the Japanese nation, which nationalism has delineated through the Japanese language and other mechanisms (Anderson 2006; Lee 2009). In this way, Brown's (2018) Japanese participants

consolidated their "national" identities. However, further research is needed to explore the role of imagined communities in foreign language learning.

Kubota (2011) analyses adult Japanese who learnt English in the private (*eikaiwa*) sector using the term "consumption" rather than Norton's (1995, 2001, 2013) "investment". In Japan, where English is a widely learnt (but not so widely used) foreign language, Kubota (2011) concludes that "[l]earners consume goods and services for self-fulfilment and enjoyment in pursuit of social inclusion in an imagined community in which English, whiteness, and native speakerness are commodified" (p. 476). Drawing on Kubota (2011), Seo and his colleagues (2012) consider Japanese learners at Hong Kong's lifelong learning institute as consumers who studied Japanese for pure enjoyment, with no desire or need to increase their symbolic and material capital. Kubota (2011), however, also suggests that "[s]triving to belong to an imagined English-speaking community [in Japan] brings hope and refuge" (p. 487) beyond mere enjoyment for some learners. More recent studies (e. g. Nomura et al. 2019) show that young people in Hong Kong used Japanese language learning as their "pedagogical safe houses" (Canagarajah 2004) in which they constructed alternative identities to safeguard their security and well-being from Hong Kong's highly competitive educational culture. In this paper, I argue that learning Japanese as a foreign language in contemporary Hong Kong is more related to learners' symbolic investments and cultural identities shaped by their imagined Japanese-speaking communities.

Applied linguistic research on imagined communities has inherited the logic of modern nation-building from Anderson (2006) and the attention to vulnerable language learners from Norton (2001) and Kanno (2008). In order to address a gap in knowledge about the relationship between imagined communities and foreign language learning, I chose Hong Kong as my research site for three main reasons: (a) Hong Kong's complex transition from a British colony to part of the Chinese nation (Lee and Chan 2024; Lui 2020), (b) the perceived marginalisation of Japanese-speaking Hongkongers from the local Japanese companies where they worked (Nomura and Yuan 2019), plausibly linked with the robust cultural (national) identity of the "Japanese" (Brown 2018; Lee 2009), and (c) the immense influence of Japan in Hong Kong, whether symbolic or material, traditional or modern (Humphreys and Miyazoe-Wong 2007; Nakano 2002, 2009; Nomura and Yuan 2019). In this paper on foreign language learning, I define imagined communities as settings in which learners invest in the target language and construct their cultural identities as modes of participation (and non-participation), mainly but not always for the future.

3 Research context and method

3.1 Research context

Hong Kong – a former British colony handed over to China in 1997 – is inextricably linked with its complicated postcolonial transition. Since the early 2010s, Hong Kong has witnessed historic events, including the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the widespread protests triggered by the Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) in 2019. To quell unrest in its autonomous administrative region, China's central government bypassed Hong Kong's legislative body and enacted the National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020. A quarter of a century into the postcolonial era, the relationship between local (Hong Kong) and national (Chinese) identities – more amicable at the time of the handover – has recently become contentious, particularly among younger generations (Lee and Chan 2024). In 2022, Hong Kong experienced an outflow of 0.9 % of its population, leaving the authorities desperate for new talent (Census and Statistics Department 2023).[4] The introduction of the NSL means that Beijing will no longer tolerate anything it deems anti-national, causing many Hongkongers to feel intense anxiety and despair about their future (Lui 2020). The NSL – reinforced by the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance, passed unanimously by Hong Kong's local legislature in March 2024 – has silenced public outcry, and many dissidents have subsequently been jailed or ousted (Lo 2021). In education, the NSL has forced "schools, colleges and institutions beyond the education sector to participate in a public jamboree of patriotic enthusiasm" (Vickers and Morris 2022: 200; cf. Figure 1).

Despite Japan's occupation of Hong Kong between 1941 and 1945 and the ongoing territorial disputes between China and Japan, Japan has had a massive economic and cultural impact on post-war Hong Kong (Nakano 2002, 2009). Japan also attracts a huge number of travellers from Hong Kong. Almost a third of the total population travelled to Japan in 2019, and a third of these travellers had visited Japan more than ten times (Consulate-General of Japan in Hong Kong 2022). Not surprisingly, Japanese is widely learnt and spoken as an optional foreign language in Hong Kong. In 2021, up to 2.0 % of the multilingual region's population spoke Japanese (Census and Statistics Department 2024b), and 27,665 people were enrolled in Japanese language courses at 73 institutes (Japan Foundation 2023). Cantonese is the dominant language in Hong Kong, and both English and Mandarin – the national languages of the past and present sovereigns – are also compulsory in schools. While so many people invest their time, effort, and money in Japanese primarily due to their affection for Japanese

4 However, Hong Kong's population increased by 0.4 % in 2023, mainly due to an influx of people from mainland China (Census and Statistics Department 2024a).

Figure 1: An advertisement promoting National Security Education Day on 15 April 2023 at a railway station in Hong Kong (own photograph).

culture, investment in compulsory languages (i. e. English, Mandarin) is largely related to instrumental benefits (Humphreys and Spratt 2008).

3.2 Participants

A total of 18 adult ethnic Chinese Hongkongers (eight females and ten males) who were learning or had previously learnt Japanese participated in this study. They had been learning Japanese for between three and 40 years (cf. Table 1 for a list of participants). These participants included classroom learners, informal learners, and self-taught learners. They were born in Hong Kong or elsewhere between 1970 and 2001. Those who were born outside Hong Kong had immigrated to Hong Kong before the age of six. One participant had Japanese ancestry through his grandparents. Participants were recruited by snowballing through my personal network. Due to my profession (i. e. university teacher), however, they were skewed towards educated individuals, despite my efforts to maximise diversity in terms of attributes such as gender, age, occupation, and length of learning Japanese. While one

Table 1: Participants.

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Years of learning	Occupation	Language
1	Veronica*	30s	Female	3	Interpreter	English
2	John	40s	Male	10	Doctor	English
3	Chris	30s	Male	18	Merchandiser	Japanese
4	Ken	20s	Male	9	Mature student	Japanese
5	Brian	50s	Male	10	Writer	English
6	Cat	50s	Female	35	Artist	Japanese
7	Jacky+	40s	Male	40	Investor	English
8	Ethan	40s	Male	6	Entrepreneur	English
9	Liu	50s	Male	28	Salesperson	Japanese
10	Izumo	20s	Female	10	University student	Japanese
11	Anson	20s	Female	7	University student	English
12	Yuzuka	20s	Female	10	University student	Japanese
13	Ika	20s	Male	12	Data analyst	Japanese
14	Sap	30s	Male	6	Engineer	English
15	Andy	20s	Male	10	University student	English
16	Mary#	50s	Female	10	Civil servant	English
17	Tigger	20s	Female	5	University student	English
18	Elsa	20s	Female	9	Teacher	English

Notes: *Interviewed online/+Partially Japanese descent/#No tertiary education.

participant started to work after completing secondary education, the other participants had tertiary qualifications or were studying at university. Before conducting an interview, I explained the aim and design of this research and then obtained the interviewee's informed consent. To protect their anonymity, I asked each participant to choose a pseudonym for the study. Their personal information was kept confidential to the best of my ability.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The data were collected in March and April 2023. First, I conducted an unstructured online interview with participant Veronica, who emigrated from Hong Kong in mid-2022. My main aim was to understand the context of Japanese language learning in contemporary Hong Kong. Based on this initial unstructured interview, I designed an interview guide consisting of six topics: (a) biography, (b) language repertoire, (c) Japanese learning history, (d) impressions of Japan, (e) the Cantonese expression *faan heungha*, which literally means 'go home' but slang for 'go to Japan', and (f) open-ended comments about contemporary Hong Kong. The interview guide provided a workable framework for the 17 semi-structured interviews that followed.

These semi-structured interviews took place in quiet public places (e. g. a café) in Hong Kong and lasted between one and 2 hours. I digitally recorded each interview with the consent of each interviewee, but stopped the recorder when the interviewee looked uncomfortable or the topic sounded too intrusive. During each interview, I also took detailed field-notes to organise the interviewee's life events and summarise other information. Participants chose to be interviewed in either English or Japanese, but switching to Cantonese was frequent, especially when not being recorded. Two participants provided written narratives in Japanese about their Japanese language learning during or after the interviews. I included these as part of the data for analysis.

Following Charmaz (2014), I conducted a qualitative, inductive analysis to understand how Japanese language learners' imagined communities shape their symbolic investments and cultural identities in contemporary Hong Kong. After reading the data transcripts, field-notes, and written narratives, I conducted an initial heuristic open coding. I identified emergent codes under four categories: (a) motivations for learning Japanese, (b) identities as ethnic Chinese Hongkongers, (c) identities as Japanese language learners, and (d) visions for the future. Each participant was constantly compared with the others in terms of these four categories. I also paid attention to outliers, as they might reveal unnoticed patterns. For example, the initial coding revealed that only a few participants ($n = 3$) were planning to move to Japan soon. Drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of imagined communities in applied linguistics, I refined the emergent codes and proceeded to theoretical coding. The theoretical coding identified three themes related to participants' imagined Japanese-speaking communities: (a) symbolic investment, (b) perceived marginalisation, and (c) voluntary peripheralisation (cf. Table 2 for

Table 2: Coding results.

Theme 1: Symbolic investment: "Japan is a dream place for us".
I make a symbolic investment in Japanese. (17/18)
I use *faan heungha* 'go home' to mean 'go to Japan' in Cantonese slang. (7/18)
Theme 2: Perceived marginalisation: "Japanese people are polite but distant".
I think that Japan is a closed society. (17/18)
I am more culturally compatible with Japan than with Hong Kong. (1/18)
Theme 3: Voluntary peripheralisation: "I'd rather have Japan as my paradise".
I see myself as a foreigner or an outsider in Japan. (18/18)
I am not satisfied with the situation in Hong Kong today. (16/18)
I have emigrated from Hong Kong or will emigrate one day. (15/18)
I think that Japan is a stressful culture. (11/18)
I plan to move to Japan soon. (3/18)

coding results). I translated data excerpts in Japanese and Cantonese into English for inclusion in the findings section.

4 Findings

4.1 Symbolic investment: "Japan is a dream place for us"

Most participants (n = 17) reported symbolic investment in Japanese in diverse and personalised ways. An affinity with Japanese culture typically attracted each participant to the language, although the aspect of Japanese culture that served as their attractor varied from person to person. Elsa – a teacher in her 20s – described Japan as "a dream place" for Hongkongers, including herself.

(1) Hongkongers like to go to Japan because Japan is a dream place for us. Look at [Tokyo's] Akihabara. There're lots of fun places. […] I started learning Japanese because a classmate invited me to study with her because we loved Japanese culture. I left that [language] school, but I continued to study Japanese at university. I love going to Japan, especially to the countryside. The people are nice and simple in a good way.

(Transcript, 7 April 2023)

Symbolic investment can come from a willingness to communicate with Japanese-speaking friends. With a trace of an intense symbolic investment in social networks, Brian – a writer in his 50s – learnt Japanese at a language school in the 1990s, when he had the opportunity to interact with "great Japanese friends". But Brian also testified to his continuing symbolic investment in his religious beliefs and heritage.

(2) I stopped learning Japanese in 2000 because my close Japanese friends left Hong Kong one by one after the handover. I travel to Japan to see my friends again. Fortunately, I have kept my fluency at the travel level because I continued to the advanced level. […] I also love Japanese culture, especially Zen Buddhism, because it makes me feel the connection between Japan and me, who is Chinese. […] I like reading [Japanese] books about Zen Buddhism.

(Transcript, 3 April 2023)

Symbolic investment in Japanese can turn into material investment for profit. Ethan – an entrepreneur in his 40s – was devoted to a Japan-related hobby not discussed here. Ethan eventually quit his previous job and started a business selling products related to his hobby.

(3) I love my [hobby products] so much [that] I decided to start a company to sell them. I'm one of the most influential YouTubers in Hong Kong. Most local fans of [hobby products] must know who I am. […] I'm studying Japanese because I love those Japanese [hobby products], but now I also need to improve my fluency to communicate with Japanese business partners.

(Transcript, 3 April 2023)

Several participants (n = 7) even referred to Japan as their *heungha*, meaning 'home' but slang for 'Japan', although they did not conceive of Japan as their genuine home. Rather, these participants, such as Tigger – a university student in her 20s – used the word "jokingly" to express their close connection to imagined Japanese-speaking communities.

(4) I think *faan heungha* 'go to Japan' came into use around 2015, and there was even a TV show called *Faan Heungha*. This [slang] expression originally means 'go home', but I feel more attached to Japan than to my [family's] hometown in [China's] Guangdong, which I haven't visited for many years. There are no political overtones [in this slang expression]. We Hongkongers just have more fun in Japan than in mainland China.

(Transcript, 7 April 2023)

Cat – an artist in her 50s – elaborated on how she, as a teenager, "fell in love with Japan after hearing the sound of a gravel path leading to a temple in Kyoto" in her written narrative. But Cat objected to the slang use of *faan heungha* 'go to Japan' because she felt it could undermine Hong Kong people's cultural identity towards the Chinese nation.

(5) Don't get me wrong. I'm a big fan of Japan, and I travelled to Kyoto for almost 30 years in a row before the pandemic. Still, I don't think it's wise for young people to call a foreign country their *heungha* 'home'. Hong Kong people are Chinese because it's a fact that Hong Kong is part of China. If we denied our own [national] identity, what else could we be?

(Transcript, 3 April 2023)

Exceptionally, Ika – a data analyst in his 20s – denied having a symbolic investment in Japanese. Ika talked about how his symbolic investment eroded over time while he maintained his material investment in Japanese for a professional purpose. Ika read a great deal of Japanese documents to research the Japanese market at work.

(6) I used to love Japan. I have many Japanese friends. But as my knowledge of Japan grew, my love for Japan shrank. […] I don't use *faan heungha* [to mean 'go to Japan']. I don't like Japan so much [now], but many other Hong Kong people cherry-pick Japan's positive and convenient aspects. They would notice that Japan isn't so friendly if they worked there. […] I want to achieve native-like fluency, so I need to speak more Japanese [instead of just reading it].

(Transcript, 5 April 2023)

With one exception, participants made symbolic investments in Japanese. These learners expressed their love – or at least affection – for Japan. They embraced their own imagined Japanese-speaking communities in which they made symbolic investments in Japanese and constructed Japanese-speaking cultural identities. Even Ika – the exceptional participant who had little current symbolic investment – mentioned his past love for Japan. He recounted that he had previously belonged to a fandom-like imagined Japanese-speaking community, even though knowing "Japan" had somehow left him heartbroken.

4.2 Perceived marginalisation: "Japanese people are polite but distant"

Including Ika, almost all participants (n = 17) perceived Japan as a closed society. These participants' perceptions suggest that they experienced forms of marginalisation that prevented each of them from participating more fully in imagined Japanese-speaking communities. In John's words, Japan seemed to them an "exclusive club". Yuzuka – a university student in her 20s – also felt marginalised from her imagined Japanese-speaking community, although she had achieved the highest qualification (N1) of the JLPT and was willing to emigrate to Japan.

(7) Japan is a difficult society to enter. I couldn't make any friends during my [one-year] study in Japan. Japan is a very closed country. If I didn't like Japan, I wouldn't be studying Japanese and planning to move to Japan. […] I want to speak Japanese fluently enough to pass as a native speaker. My Japanese is still accented, although I look like a Japanese.

(Transcript, 4 April 2023)

Tigger, who explained the slang meaning of *faan heungha*, also felt marginalised during her previous stays in Japan. As a result, unlike Yuzuka, Tigger would choose a European country rather than Japan as her destination, even though she planned to stay in Japan for a year on her working holiday visa. Tigger had achieved the N1

qualification of the JLPT. Her further yet time-bound symbolic investment in Japanese coexisted with perceived marginalisation.

(8) I've been to Japan six times, and I think Japan is very entertaining. […] I don't have any close Japanese friends. I think Japanese people are polite but distant. It's not easy to make Japanese friends because of both the language and the culture. I have friends in Hong Kong, so it's not my personality issue. […] I'm about to go to Japan for my [one-year] working holiday to improve my Japanese. But living in Japan will probably make me feel lonely. […] I will probably emigrate to Europe after my grandparents pass away. Japan is not the best choice.

(Transcript, 7 April 2023)

Of partially Japanese descent, Jacky – an investor in his 40s – lived in Japan with his grandparents for three years as a child. Having visited Japan for over 300 times, Jacky was arguably the most knowledgeable participant about Japan. However, Jacky also felt marginalised from an imagined Japanese-speaking community, causing him to keep an arm's length distance from his ancestral homeland. Jacky even chose to be interviewed in English despite his high proficiency in Japanese with the highest JLPT qualification (former Grade 1).

(9) I love and hate Japan. The best approach to Japan is "earn money in Hong Kong and spend it in Japan". In my experience, staying in Japan for three months a year is my limit. The Japanese are closed-minded and sometimes discriminate against [us] foreigners. When I went to Japan years ago, the police frisked me and asked too many irrelevant questions because my Japanese had a foreign accent. […] But I don't want to speak Japanese any better. If I spoke Japanese without an accent, the locals would misunderstand me as if I knew everything about Japan.

(Transcript, 3 April 2023)

Exceptionally, Liu – a salesperson in his 50s – expressed a strong commitment to an imagined Japanese-speaking community. Liu travelled to Japan more than 100 times for business and pleasure, but he did not feel marginalised from the imagined Japanese-speaking community to which he wished to belong more fully in retirement, but not any time soon. Liu was also quick to highlight some of the drawbacks of Japan.

(10) I moved to Canada as a teenager and went to university there. […] I had the opportunity to stay with a Japanese family and quickly learnt their language. After graduating, I taught English in Japan. Then I then came back to Hong Kong to work for a Japanese company. I didn't like some of the Japanese colleagues in my company. But I feel I'm more compatible with Japanese culture than Hong Kong culture, although Japan is an overly rule-bound society. […] After I retire, I'll think about moving to Japan. I'm just too young to retire [now].

(Transcript, 3 April 2023)

Despite the exception, participants generally felt marginalised in their imagined Japanese-speaking communities. In the case of Jacky, his consequential resistance took the form of "disinvestment" in his heritage language. There are more moderate strategies for coping with marginalisation, such as passing as a native Japanese speaker or limiting the length of stay in Japan. In most cases, however, perceived marginalisation did not significantly impede participants' symbolic investment in Japanese.

4.3 Voluntary peripheralisation: "I'd rather have Japan as my paradise"

While most participants, especially those who had stayed in Japan, felt marginalised from their imagined Japanese-speaking communities, they also seemed to manage their modes of participation in such imagined communities. I refer to this management as "voluntary peripheralisation" because these learners of Japanese intended to remain on the periphery of an imagined target language community even when they could have moved towards the centre. Andy – a university student in his 20s – used "a cigarette" in his trope to illustrate that his passionate symbolic investment in Japanese and his Japanese-speaking cultural identity were limited to leisure time.

(11) I've only been to Japan four or five times, but there are lots of things to do. I can't wait to go camping in [a prefecture] in June. […] Japanese is a tool to have fun in Japan. […] Going to Japan is like a cigarette. Smoking clears your mind and makes you forget about your work, friends, interpersonal problems, and the like. […] Japan is as addictive as tobacco. As soon as the plane touches Hong Kong, I feel like going back to Japan.

(Transcript, 6 April 2023)

After I stopped recording, Andy expressed his impression of Hong Kong today. Indeed, most participants including Andy (n = 16) expressed various forms of dissatisfaction with the status quo of Hong Kong, regardless of their stances towards the current regime. However, Andy was reluctant to live in Japan permanently because he wanted to treasure Japan as an entertaining imagined community that could safeguard his well-being from the uncontrollable realities of Hong Kong.

(12) I love Hong Kong, but I don't like its current situation. Since the [social] disturbances, I've lost my freedom. I can't say what I want to say. In 2019 and 2020, I was depressed. I wanted to go to Japan to "smoke" to get away from the harsh realities. […] But going to Japan itself has nothing to do with politics. [Interviewer: Do you want to move to Japan?] No, I'd rather have Japan as my paradise.

(Field-notes, 6 April 2023)

Sap – an engineer in his 30s – had been imprisoned for about three years. His role in the anti-ELAB protests was deemed illegal. During his time in prison – or "career break", as Sap put it – learning Japanese was Sap's favourite recreation. Volunteer conversation partners occasionally visited him in prison, and he wrote to pen pals in Japanese, although censorship slowed down his correspondence. Sap even found a Japanese detainee and communicated with him in Japanese, dreaming of visiting Japan one day. Sap showed me a letter he wrote to a pen pal, which was returned to him with feedback on his use of language.

(13) I've heard that the pandemic control in Japan is also very strict. I don't think you can come to Hong Kong yet. So, please take care of your health. Everything else is secondary. Maybe my girlfriend and I will come to see you in Japan after I get out [of the prison]. Let me end my letter here. […] I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

(Written narrative, 3 April 2023)

Despite his active symbolic investment in Japanese in prison, Sap and many other participants (n = 10) invoked the stressful culture of Japan to explain why they remained on the periphery of their imagined communities. Sap was reluctant to participate too deeply in the Japanese-speaking community he had imagined "day in and day out" back in prison, reading "a Japanese dictionary that a volunteer sent in".

(14) Japan is a perfect [travel] destination, but I don't think it's a good idea to work there. Japan is a stressful society. I watched a TV series called *Hanzawa Naoki* about Japanese work culture, and many different friends tell me not to work in Japan. […] Japan is not my home country. I'm not going to live there. But if I get rich one day, I will buy a house [in Japan] to travel around Japan.

(Transcript, 5 April 2023)

Mary – a civil servant in her 50s – seemed cautious during the interview, probably because her employer (i. e. the government) had required all civil servants to pledge allegiance to the Chinese nation. While she declined to discuss contemporary Hong Kong because "it's too big to talk about", Mary did discuss why Japan offered her security and a safe haven from the reality. Like Sap, Mary implied that she controlled the extent of her participation in her imagined Japanese-speaking community.

(15) Although I'm a foreigner in Japan, I feel at home in Japan because Japan is like Hong Kong but pleasantly different. […] I want to continue studying Japanese until I can travel in Japan using only Japanese. […] I've been to Japan more than 20 times. While Hong Kong is too noisy and fast, Japan is quiet and peaceful. People [in Japan] are helpful and polite. […] My current job [in Hong Kong] is very stable, and I can't imagine working in Japan. I belong here and have no reason to move elsewhere.

(Transcript, 6 April 2023)

Anson – a university student in her 20s – was planning to apply for a scholarship for her postgraduate studies in Japan. She wanted to attend an English-medium programme at a top university and work for a global company in Japan after graduation. Anson saw her bilingual literacy in English and Chinese and her solid knowledge of information technology as her scarcity value in Japan, although she described her level of Japanese as "not as high as English" despite her ongoing symbolic investment in it.

(16) I watch [Japanese] anime every day to improve my Japanese. […] Japanese organisations tend to focus on procedures. In my view, they are less efficient and flexible than in Hong Kong. In many workplaces [in Japan], people work long hours, and the hierarchy is obvious. If I work in Japan, I'll choose a [non-Japanese] international company rather than a Japanese [domestic] company. It's hard to find myself in mainstream Japanese society. Japanese and Hongkongers have very different mentalities.

(Transcript, 4 April 2023)

Anson wanted to remain on the periphery of her imagined Japanese-speaking community by staying away from what she called "mainstream Japanese society". At the same time, she expressed her determination to leave Hong Kong soon after I stopped recording. While only a few participants including Anson (n = 3) intended to move to Japan soon, Anson and most of the other participants (n = 15) wanted to emigrate from Hong Kong to other countries, including Veronica, who was already living abroad.

(17) Hong Kong has changed a lot. I don't think Hong Kong is a very good place to start a family. […] I use the word *heungha* 'home' very seriously. I cherish Hong Kong as my home, and nowhere else could be my home. […] I hope to bring up my children in a safer and better environment. That's why I want to leave here, even though Hong Kong is my only home.

(Field-notes, 4 April 2023)

While many participants felt marginalised to varying degrees, they also skilfully constituted their Japanese-speaking cultural identities through symbolic investments in exchange for a sense of security and well-being. By remaining on the periphery, these participants crafted their imagined Japanese-speaking communities as a safe and entertaining place – or "my paradise" in Andy's words. Such cultural identities reflect their helplessness in the face of Hong Kong's current situation. However, none of the participants sought any legal affiliation with the Japanese nation.

5 Discussion and implications

Thus far, I have attempted to answer the following research question: How do Japanese language learners' imagined communities shape their symbolic investments and cultural identities in contemporary Hong Kong? The findings suggest that the Japanese language learners who participated in this study invested symbolically and actively in Japanese based on their association with imagined Japanese-speaking communities, from which they derived security and well-being (cf. Excerpts 1, 2, and 4). Despite the participants' diverse and personalised symbolic investments, they tended to feel marginalised from fuller participation in such imagined Japanese-speaking communities but somehow coped with the perceived marginalisation in the form of moderate non-participation (cf. Excerpts 7 and 8). At the same time, the participants deliberately remained on the periphery of their imagined Japanese-speaking communities in order to maintain a sense of Japan as a safe haven and to break away from the difficult realities in Hong Kong (cf. Excerpts 11, 15, and 16). Taken together, the imagined Japanese-speaking communities drive these ethnic Chinese

Hongkongers to learn Japanese primarily for their own security and well-being and to construct Japanese-speaking cultural identities that allow them to cherish Japan from afar and stay away from its downsides. In the context of contemporary Hong Kong, it is misleading to equate learning Japanese as a popular foreign language option with any allegiance to the nation of Japan, although people's stances toward the current situation of Hong Kong is not always straightforward (cf. Excerpts 12 and 17). But at the very least, all of my Hong Kong Chinese participants embraced Japanese-speaking but non-Japanese cultural identities. None of them seemed to seek "similar ways of understanding the world" (Norton 2013: 56) with the "Japanese", despite their desire or need to speak the same language, occasionally with traces of a shared heritage (cf. Excerpt 2). In fact, even the participant with partial Japanese ancestry identified himself as a "foreigner" in Japan (cf. Excerpt 9), among all the others.

The findings of this study support previous researchers (e. g. Humphreys and Miyazoe-Wong 2007; Nomura and Yuan 2019) who claim that Japanese language learners in Hong Kong are motivated affectively rather than instrumentally. This study goes further to analyse this affection in terms of imagined communities, a term coined by Anderson (2006) and later imported to applied linguistics by Norton (2001). In Norton's (1995, 2001, 2013) terms, Japanese language learners in contemporary Hong Kong make symbolic investments in exchange for intangibles such as security and well-being, while their life trajectories may also involve material investments for profit and income. As Norton (2001) predicts, Japanese language learners in Hong Kong also seem to engage in moderate non-participation when they feel marginalised, but curiously, such moderate non-participation can coexist with symbolic investment. At the same time, they seem to deliberately remain on the periphery of imagined Japanese-speaking communities, even when they seem to be able to deepen their levels of participation. Peripherality refers to "the fact that some degree of non-participation *can* be an enabling factor of participation" (Norton 2001: 161, emphasis mine). One can also choose to remain on the periphery for as long as one wishes, although Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of situated learning supposes that legitimate peripheral participation – despite the possible peaks and troughs – progresses towards fuller participation over time. One of the theoretical contributions of this study is the finding that my participants engage in voluntary peripheralisation. Japanese language learners in Hong Kong skilfully control their participation in imagined Japanese-speaking communities to gain security, well-being, and other valuable intangibles through their symbolic investments.

Voluntary peripheralisation is, in a sense, a distance management strategy between language learners and their imagined target language communities. Not only does voluntary peripheralisation allow language learners to continue their symbolic investments, but it also enables them to maintain friendly relations with

their imagined target language communities and to construct positive, trouble-free language learner identities. In contemporary Hong Kong, Japanese is optional and therefore harmless. In Kanno's (2008) terms, the multilingualism of Japanese language learners is "additive" rather than "subtractive", as learning Japanese enriches the learner's language repertoire rather than damaging it. Anderson (2006) is silent on foreign language learning. However, based on my findings, voluntary peripheralisation seems to help Japanese language learners to peacefully connect with their imagined Japanese-speaking communities from afar.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Japan's successful nation-building has led the Japanese to "imagine themselves [as] members [of the unified nation]" (Anderson 2006: 97), while disregarding "non-Japanese Japanese language" (Lee 2009: 216) spoken by non-native speakers. Japanese learners of English thus consolidate their identity as Japanese citizens by learning English as a means of communicating with the world outside Japan, but not with their compatriots who are "native" speakers of Japanese (Brown 2018). My findings, however, do not provide firm evidence that Japanese language learners in Hong Kong are similarly cementing the Chinese-speaking cultural identities of my participants, which may reflect the complexities of the sovereignty transition and the youth of full-fledged nationhood in contemporary Hong Kong (Lee and Chan 2024; Lui 2020). Suffice it to say that learning Japanese, however much they may love Japan, tends to make contemporary Hongkongers think of Japan as an imagined "foreign" community and themselves as "foreigners" or non-members of the Japanese nation.

The findings of this study have implications for the pedagogical practice of language teachers. Since Norton's (2001) seminal work, research on imagined communities in applied linguistics has tended to invite language teachers to "be aware of their learners' imagined communities of practice and *discuss them in classes*" (Tajeddin et al. 2023: 905, emphasis mine). While Norton's (2001) suggestion that "teachers might encourage learners to think of themselves as living in […] the imagined community" (p. 170) remains relevant, at least in Hong Kong, it may well be a challenge for a learner to openly discuss their imagined communities in class. At least two of my findings relate to this challenge. First, in contemporary Hong Kong and other sensitive societies, people, including my participants, tend to be cautious about expressing their identities – whether legal or cultural – and futures (e. g. emigration) in public or when being recorded. Second, perhaps with the advent of social networking services on the internet (e. g. YouTube), each learner's symbolic investment has become increasingly diverse and personalised, as most participants suggested (see also Nomura et al. 2019, for similar findings). Japanese popular culture is no longer shared across society as it was at the end of the last century, when many Hongkongers enjoyed the same TV series from Japan (Nakano 2002). Given these two findings, I recommend that teachers use channels such as the exchange of individual

assignments, personal communication before, after, or between classes, and even one-on-one interview tests – what Canagarajah (2004) might call pedagogical safe houses – to build rapport with their learners and then move on to discuss their investments, identities, and imagined communities. Where personal and societal security may be in conflict, such pedagogical considerations are particularly beneficial.

Before concluding this discussion, I need to be clear about the limitations of this study. Firstly, the findings of my study cannot and should not be overgeneralised, as each participant was unique in their own way. The relatively modest sample size (n = 18) also makes me hesitant to claim any generalisability. As I mentioned earlier, the participants were relatively well-educated and affluent with stable jobs, although I appreciate the genuineness of each participant's voice. Secondly, the data came from qualitative interviews with my participants but not from elsewhere. Perhaps, other research methods, such as classroom observations, would have made the data richer and more compelling. Lastly, while this study focuses only on my participants' learning of Japanese as a foreign language in Hong Kong, the learning (and use) of Japanese as a second language by Hongkongers in Japan remains unexplored. It may also be worthwhile to understand the symbolic investments and cultural identities of Hongkongers living in Japan and using Japanese as a second language "deemed essential for survival" (Kubota 2011: 474). The recent depreciation of the Japanese yen may encourage migration from Hong Kong to Japan. The function of imagined Japanese-speaking communities among such Hong Kong newcomers in Japan also deserves theoretical attention.

6 Conclusions

I have explored how Japanese language learners' imagined communities shape their symbolic investments and cultural identities to uncover what lies behind contemporary Hongkongers' "affective motivation" (Humphreys and Miyazoe-Wong 2007; Humphreys and Spratt 2008) for learning Japanese. The findings suggest that ethnic Chinese Hongkongers symbolically invest in Japanese language learning in exchange for valuable intangibles. Japanese language learners sometimes feel marginalised from imagined Japanese-speaking communities, especially during their stay in Japan. However, they also tend to voluntarily remain on the periphery of imagined Japanese-speaking communities to continue to love their "Japan" from afar and to preserve it as a safe haven from the uncontrollable realities of contemporary Hong Kong. Ultimately, these affectively motivated learners of Japanese – or skilful "investors" in Japanese – tend to conceive of their "Japan" as imagined foreign communities from which they seek security, well-being, and other valuable symbolic

resources, to which they do not wish to fully belong, and in which they choose to remain foreigners. Such cultural identities may seem non-committal, but they are necessary. Japan needs to be "attractive" and "entertaining", yet "exclusive" and "distant".

Future research can shed light on foreign language learning in more diverse contexts to assess the theoretical utility of "voluntary peripheralisation". I have found that Japanese language learners in Hong Kong skilfully manage their distance from imagined Japanese-speaking communities to keep their affective motivations or symbolic investments alive. Whether such a distance management strategy applies to foreign language learning in other contexts remains to be explored. As a context, Hong Kong is of an outstanding value. Perhaps few other postcolonial regions that did not become independent nations have struggled as much to forget the old nation and learn to belong to the new one (Lui 2020). Learning foreign languages in contemporary Hong Kong, including English – if it can be considered a "foreign" language – awaits further research. I hope that the present study will encourage future researchers and educators to gain a deeper and more contextualised insight into imagined communities in which language learners may negotiate their complex identities.

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