

GFL

German as a foreign language

**Enrolment Limitations as the main Motivation behind
choosing German as a Major at competitive Chinese
Universities and its consequences**

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To understand the motivation behind choosing German as a Foreign language (GFL) as their major, the present study examined 75 Chinese college students from Peking University (N = 34) and Fudan University (N = 41). For the examination, an online questionnaire of 18 quantitative and 3 qualitative items was designed. The data led to three major findings: 1) the majority of students (N = 46) claimed that German was not their first choice major, 34 of whom stated they chose German because of limited choices due to their Gaokao score, 2) an independent samples t-test showed that whether German was their first choice or not functioned as a predictor for further motivation dimensions and, 3) in both groups the prospect of a possible study abroad in Germany has been stated as a higher motivation than an interest in German culture or possible benefits on the job market.

1. Introduction

In the last decade, the number of German as a Foreign Language (GFL) students in post-secondary institutions of the People's Republic of China has been steadily increasing, in contrast to the global trend and the unstable or decreasing numbers of other East Asian countries such as Japan or South Korea (Auswärtiges Amt 2015: 10-12; Auswärtiges Amt 2020: 12-17). Different reasons for this phenomenon have been proposed, such as the stronger economic exchange between China and Germany (Middeke & Semyonova 2019: 201-203), an option for studying abroad (Liu 2019) as well as China's political effort to establish a multilanguage approach in their education system (Li & Lian 2017; 123).

However, the core of this development has not been empirically tested yet: What is the motivation of today's students to choose German as their major at universities? Undeniably, under the era of Angela Merkel (chancellor from 2005-2021), the economic relationship between China and Germany has strengthened, especially after establishing the 'strategical partnership' between the two nations in 2011 that led to economic benefits on both sides (Barkin 2021: 4-6). This raises the question of whether Chinese students today are motivated to study German, hoping for business and career opportunities from their acquisition of the German language. Or are the prospects of a study abroad or a

genuine interest in German literature, culture, and arts stronger pulling factors into the German department?

Getting answers to these questions is far from redundant. They are not only relevant concerning China's political efforts to promote multilingual education, but also for the German departments at the universities themselves. Looking at the current discussions in China, whether German studies at colleges should aim toward a more economy-oriented, literature-oriented, or translation-oriented approach (Zhang 2019; Zhao 2020; Zhu 2020), the present study attempts to bring the students' perspective into the discussion.

Nevertheless, the rising number of university students majoring in German cannot be solely explained by the students' motivations to learn the language. As will be shown below, many of the students who are enrolled in a German major did not intend to study German in the first place, the reason for which those groups – students who study German because it was their choice versus the ones who chose it as a Plan B – have to be distinguished when looking at the results.

To understand this distinction, the Chinese college admissions system needs to be explained. Similar to the *Numerus Clausus* in Germany, the result of the *National College Entrance Examination* (NCEE), commonly known as the *gaokao* (高考; 'Higher Education Exam'), determines which universities one can enroll in. Even within universities, there are differences depending on the course of study. Hence, it is more difficult to be admitted to popular courses such as law or economics than to less popular ones such as Chinese Studies or foreign languages.

The admission rate at top universities in China is exceptionally low. The most prestigious US universities such as *Harvard University*, *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, *Princeton University*, *Stanford University*, and *Yale University* each had an acceptance rate of 4% at the fall admission of 2021 (Bouchrika 2023). Those numbers are even lower in China: For example, in 2020 and 2021 an average of only 0.7% of applicants were accepted at Beijing's top universities *Peking University* and *Tsinghua University* (Sohu 2021); As of 2023 Bouchrika, citing the QS World University Rankings 2023, reports an acceptance rate of 2% for *Tsinghua University*.

However, there is another way to get into these elite universities: The agreement 外国语中学推荐保送生 ('Foreign Language High School recommends guaranteed students') allows an agreed number of graduates from 16 foreign language high schools across

China preferential access to these universities, without achieving the required Gaokao-score. But they are obliged to major in a foreign language and cannot change their major before graduation (Sina Education 2017).

The importance of being accepted at an elite university in China can hardly be overstated. Not only does it mean better opportunities for a professional career, but often also social advancement and a social standing that can be beneficial on the difficult marriage market. Especially in smaller cities, it is an event of considerable magnitude when there is a high school graduate who has been accepted at a prestigious institution such as Peking University or Fudan University. At the same time, the situation has toughened since the introduction of the one-child policy: since there is only one child in households, all the pressure is on just those individual children who are supposed to fulfil the family's hopes for the future (Bregnbæk 2016: 6-9, 89).

Thus, as will be stated later in the methodology section, these enrolment limitations and special policies must be taken in consideration when examining the motivations for choosing to study German.

2. Literature Review

As a result of the rapid increase in the number of GFL learners in China, academic research has also increasingly focused on the phenomenon. A look at the development of the last 20 years shows the extent of the growth. Bao & Mitschian described the expansion of GFL-education in Chinese high schools as a “boom” (2012: 52). While in the year 2000, only 6 schools in China taught German to approximately 600 students, at the end of the decade a total of 78 schools taught German to more than 7600 students. They claim the establishment of the DSD-2 exam at foreign language schools in China (first in 2005 in Shanghai), as well as the successful PASCH-Initiative („Schulen: Partner der Zukunft“) to be the main drivers behind this development (Bao & Mitschian 2012: 59). As of 2022 more than 128 schools in the People's Republic of China participate in the PASCH-Initiative (Weltkarte der Pasch-Schulen 2022).

However, only a small proportion of the trend can be attributed to the rising numbers in high schools. In 2015, high school students accounted for only 10,38% of GFL learners in China, against 38,26% in tertiary education and 51.36% in adult education, which illustrates how the boom cuts across age and society (Li & Lian 2017: 122).

As a consequence, the *International Society of German Studies* dedicated its 2019 yearbook to the development of GFL in China, ultimately publishing almost 30 manuscripts and studies about the manifold facets of this topic (Li & Roelcke 2019). Scholars argue that the rise of GFL in China is most likely to continue (Li & Li 2019; Zhao 2020). As the Ministry of Education established its first *Education Standard for German* for Middle schools (普通高中德语课程标准) in 2017, it expects that it will result in more students choosing German as a major later in tertiary education (Li & Li 2019), especially considering that some of the foreign language middle and high school students, as previously explained, have an easier entrance into the foreign language faculties of prestigious universities (Bao & Mitschian 2012: 58-59).

The increasing exchange has also led to a transformation of the GFL-didactics and methods in China. While teachers from German-speaking countries came with new methods and didactics, which have been welcomed and adapted, the teaching styles have also morphed under the influence of traditional ones in China, resulting in “German didactics and methodology working out with Chinese characteristics” (Zhu 2019: 20).

Looking at how much political effort China and Germany have put into the establishment and professionalization of GFL education in China, a further rise seems likely. The biggest obstacle, for now, seems to be the absence of a major at Chinese universities, that specifically educates future German teachers, which is why Zhu (2020: 58-62) demands a focus to create such a major in the coming years. As of 2023, I am aware of at least two universities in China which are trying to create a curriculum for a German teaching major.

While there has been a wide variety of articles about the GFL development in China published, research about the students’ motivations to learn German is still under-represented. In recent years, a small number of empirical studies have investigated the motivation of Chinese students to learn foreign languages beyond English. For instance, Chen et al. (2021) examined the motivation of L2-learners of French and German, in which regression analyses revealed that learning experience and promotion-focused instrumentality were the predictors for the German learners’ intended learning effort whereas regarding the motivation of French learners an ideal L2 self has been detected as the predictor.

The most comprehensive studies on Chinese students’ motivation to learn German have shown that students among different proficiency levels study German for similar reasons,

such as major study/research, further education, future career prospects as well as an interest in foreign language learning and German (Liu & Li 2018; Liu 2019a). Further research revealed that Chinese GFL-learners residing in China and those in Germany both show moderate levels of integrative and instrumental motivation to learn German, yet, differ in specific motivation dimensions. Hence, the students in the study-abroad context showed overall a higher motivation than the in-China learners, statistically significant in the dimensions of *Instrumental Orientation* (learning German for external reasons) and *Orientation for Miscellaneous Purposes*, while no statistically significant difference in the dimension of *Integrative Orientation* (learning German for intrinsic motivated reasons) has been detected (Liu 2019b).

Whereas those mixed-methodology investigations try to understand the motivation of L2 and L3 acquisition at universities,¹ the present study shifts its focus to the decision to choose GFL as their major in the first place. Thus, only students who study German as their major have been examined, while students who study German as a third language – e.g. at Fudan University, which implemented a mandatory third language program for EFL students (Zheng et al. 2019: 5) – have been excluded from the investigation.

Furthermore, the present study investigates the motivation to study German at some of China's most competitive universities. In the fall semester of 2021, I asked the freshman students in a German communication class, why they have chosen to study German. The students could answer anonymously with the mind-map creating Website *Mentimeter*. In addition to the expected answers (e.g. interest in Germany, literature, international communication), a strikingly large number answered that they had chosen German because of the entrance limitations of Fudan University.

Based on these answers and the system entrance policies explained earlier, we can derive another criterion for the decision to study German as a major: As minor languages currently require a lower Gaokao score than more popular subjects (for example law, economics, engineering), students can choose German – or other minor languages – as

¹ De Bot & Jaensch (2012) describe that there are indeed differences in L2 acquisition and L3 acquisition, but that they cannot be clearly delimited either cognitively or hermeneutically. Although the Chinese students learn German at least as L3 or Ln – since they have all been confronted with the compulsory subject of ESL since middle school – a chronological division into L2 and L3 does not necessarily make sense if one takes into account that the language acquired as the third language can sometimes be mastered better over time than the language acquired as the second (De Bot & Jaensch 2012: 133-136), as is certainly the case with some graduates of German studies.

their major in order to be able to enter prestigious high ranked universities, as their score is not high enough for more popular subjects. The main motivation behind such a decision would not be studying German, but to sacrifice desired subjects in exchange to study at one of these universities. The same applies to graduates of foreign language high schools which have the special agreement (外国语中学推荐保送生) with the universities. In this case, too, German is not necessarily the first-choice course of study, but should be regarded as a bridge to an elite university. I thus hypothesize that the limitation of choice among the majors because of the entrance policies is:

- 1) a reason for many students to have selected German as their major, and
- 2) further motivation dimensions depend on whether German was their subject of first choice or not.

To test those hypotheses, Peking University (PKU) and Fudan University (FDU), which are considered among the best universities in China – PKU being listed as the nation's number 1, FDU as the nation's number 3 and leading the ranking in Shanghai (Times Higher Education 2021) – have been selected for the examination. Both universities held a German department within their foreign language faculties.

3. Methodology and Examination

3.1 Research Design

A total of 75 undergraduate students, from Fudan University (N = 41) and Peking University (N = 34), took part in the study. The questionnaire was sent electronically to all undergraduate students in the departments, with more than three quarters of each participating. Female respondents (N = 57) outnumbered male (N = 18) respondents. 39 of the students studied were in their freshman year, leaving a total number of 36 students from the other grades (sophomore N = 27, junior N = 9, senior N = 7).

A bilingual questionnaire (German and Chinese) was created for the study. The questionnaire was transferred to the app Sojump (问卷星) and sent to the students via WeChat (Weixin). The introduction to the study explained to them the purpose of the study, guaranteed anonymity and stated the estimated time for answering all the questions (10 Minutes). Furthermore, we informed the students that the open-ended questions could be answered in Chinese, German or English.

After filling in the population descriptors (age, sex, university, grade), students were asked whether German was their major of choice (and if not, which other major was their first choice). This distinction split the students into two groups, those who stated German was the first choice (GFC) and those who stated German was an alternative choice (GAC), functioning as the independent variable for the motivation dimensions introduced later. Additionally, we asked whether they had learned German before entering the university (if yes, where). For further interpretation of the quantitative results, and to ask about the possibility of other motivations not covered by the quantitative questions or stated motivation dimensions, additional open-ended questions were asked (e.g. *Why are you studying German? What do you hope to gain from learning German?*). Follow-up questions only popped up if relevant to the answer to the previous question, and students could not submit the questionnaire before they had answered all questions. Therefore, no missing values occurred.

In accordance with the stated motives for studying GFL at university level in chapter 2, we developed a questionnaire targeting 3 major motives. Thus, the students might study German motivated by:

1. Business and Career Opportunities (BCOM)
2. German Language, Culture, and Arts (LCAM)
3. Studying Abroad in Germany (SAM)

For each of the dimensions 5 different items were created, which offered the respondents statements which could be answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* (非常赞同/*Stimme voll und ganz zu*) to *disagree strongly* (代表完全不赞同/*Stimme absolut nicht zu*). The Likert scale has been coded from 2 (*strongly agree*) to -2 (*strongly disagree*). Subsequently, the items were summarized and then tested for reliability using Cronbach's alpha test.

Variable	Sample Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Business and Career Opportunities; BCOM (5 items)	我学习德语是因为这有助于我找到工作。 (Engl.: <i>I am learning German because it could help me to find a job</i>)	0.850
German Language, Culture, and Arts; LCAM (5 Items)	我学习德语, 因为我认为它是一种有趣的语言。 (Engl.: <i>I study German, because I think it is an interesting language.</i>)	0.681
Studying Abroad Germany; SAM (5 items)	学习德语有助于我以后出国留学。 (Engl.: <i>Learning German will help me to study abroad in the future.</i>)	0.674

Table 1: A total of 15 items (in Chinese and German) had to be answered on a 5-point Likert scale

Following Janssens et al.'s (2008: 275) classification (considering a Cronbach's Alpha (α) value of .60-.80 as 'good', and .80-0.90 as 'very good'), the internal consistency of the questionnaire is satisfactory. Consequently, we proceeded to compare the results of those three motivation dimensions as well as their dependency on the independent variable – if German was their major of first choice (GFC) or not (GAC) – as stated in the hypothesis.

3.1 Results

Amongst all the students ($N = 75$), less than half ($N = 29$) answered that German was their major of first choice (GFC). The other students ($N = 46$) are enrolled in the German major program, even though it was not their desired major of choice (GAC).

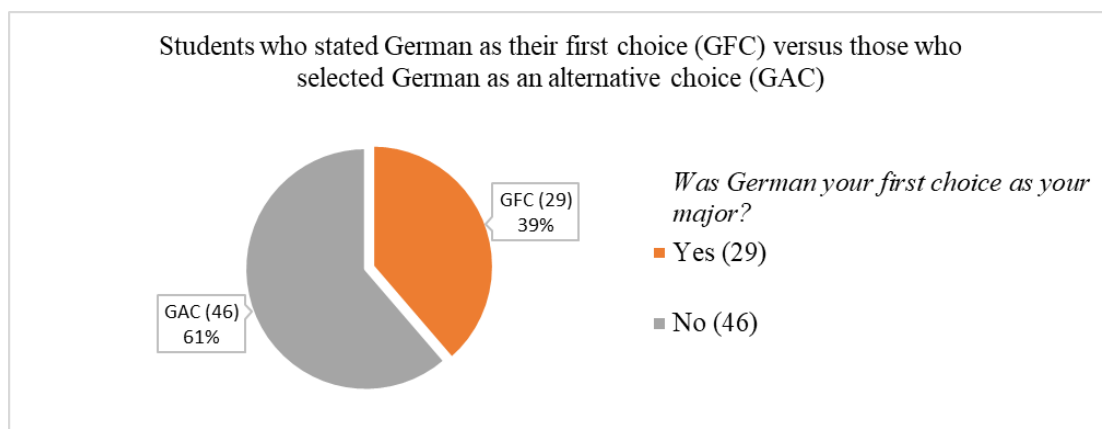


Fig. 1: Almost two thirds of the students stated that German was not their major of first choice.

Furthermore, 34 students answered that the limitation due to their Gaokao scores led them to choose German as a major. How important this factor was in the decision-making process can be seen in the qualitative data: In the answer to the open-ended question *Why did you choose to study German?* (您为什么会选择学习德语?), more than 31 answers referred to the limitations through the entry policy as the reason. A selection of those answers is depicted in the following table and provides insights into the variety of entry policies:

<i>Why did you choose to study German?</i>
a) My gaokao results left me with a choice among minor languages. I am more interested in Germany and the major I wanted to study is very good in Germany.
b) Cuz [Because] I didn't reach the score which my dream major requires.
c) Firstly, it's the best choice I could choose in Fudan (I really want to enter into a comprehensive university like Fudan). Secondly, I have some interest in Germany and would like to go abroad. Thirdly, learning German can help me learn jurisprudence (because Germany has a very high status in the history of law).
d) I had no choice [Original: 没有选择]
e) I graduated from a foreign language high-school, so I'm only allowed to study languages at college. And when I was in high school, I read some works by German writers and I really liked them. [Original: <i>Ich komme von einer Fremdsprachenschule, daher kann ich im College nur Sprachen studieren. Und als ich in der High School war, habe ich einige Werke deutscher Schriftsteller gelesen und es hat mir sehr gut gefallen.</i>]

Table 2: Different aspects of the entrance policies led students to choose German as their major

The statements a) to c) confirm the motivation mentioned above, according to which the comparably low Gaokao scores left the students with a limited choice. While a) specifies that she was allowed to pick one of the minor languages and that acquiring the German language might be helpful to study her desired major later in Germany, c) clarifies that her main motivation was to study at a “comprehensive university like Fudan”, and among the given options German studies seemed the most promising. This statement underlines the importance of studying at a prestigious university, as seen above (Bregnbæk 2016). Certain students claimed like d) that they had no choice, without further explanations. Other than a) to c), the statement e) does not refer to the Gaokao score but to the special agreement (‘Foreign Language High School recommends guaranteed students’) mentioned above.

Even though statements a), c) and e) refer to limited choice due to the entrance policy, they also claim secondary reasons for having chosen German, and not any other minor language or majors that don't require the highest Gaokao scores. Concretely, a) and c) mention as a motivation a possible study abroad (SAM) in Germany, e) an interest in German literature (LCAM), and c) states that learning the German language might be beneficial for her future career (BCOM). Accordingly, it must be noted that even the group of students who did not indicate German as their desired course of study were influenced in their decision by a variety of motivation factors, which the statements show correspond with the motivation dimensions developed above.

As outlined in the introduction, we assumed that the group of students who stated German was their major of first choice (GFC), differ in their motivation from the other group (GAC). The results supported the assumption. As seen in the graph below, the students who stated German was their first choice showed a higher motivation regarding the study abroad dimension (SAM) as well as a higher motivation through an interest in German literature, culture, and arts (LCAM). Subsequently, to verify this hypothesis, the mean scores of those two groups have been compared with an independent samples t-test.

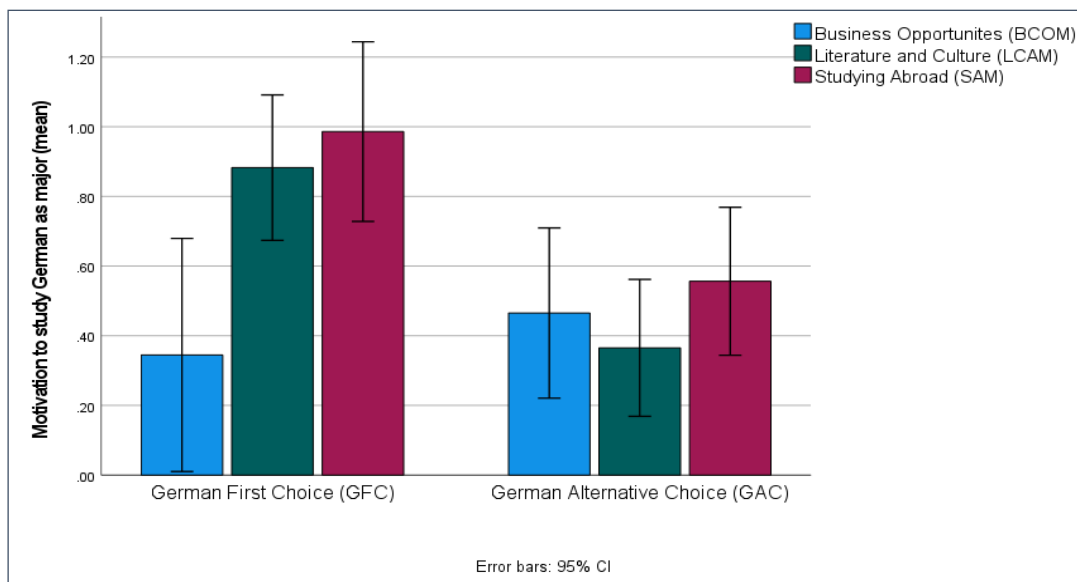


Fig. 2: GFC-students showed a significantly higher motivation in the LCAM and SAM dimension

There was a statistically significant difference concerning the study abroad motivation (SAM) between the group of students who stated German as their major of first choice (GFC) and the group who did not choose German as their desired major (GAC), with a mean motivation score of 0.43 (95%-CI[0.10, 0.76]) lower for the second group, $t(62,07)$

= 2.62, $p = .011$. While no significant difference in the motivation regarding career and business opportunities (BCOM) could be found, there was another statistically significant difference ($p < .001$) regarding the motivation coming from an interest in German literature, culture, and art (LCAM), with a mean motivation score of 0.52 (95%-CI[0.24, 0.80]) lower for the GAC-group, $t(67,53) = 3.67$.

t-test for Equality of Means (GFC vs. GAC)								
	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p			Lower	Upper
BCOM	-.592	56.686	.278	.556	-.12039	.20351	-.52796	.28718
LACM	3.667	67.526	<.001	<.001	.51754	.14112	.23591	.79918
SAM	2.616	62.069	.006	.011	.42969	.16426	.10134	.75804

4. Interpretation

Both hypotheses were confirmed. More than 60% of the students stated that studying German was not their first choice (see Graph 1). The qualitative statements (table 2) also underlined, how entrance limitations played a major factor in their decision to study German. Correspondingly, in response to the open-ended question "Why are you studying German?", 31 students referred to the entrance limitations of competitive universities. Other motivations ("Besides, I would like to study in Germany") were often only given as secondary reasons.

The second hypothesis was also confirmed. The independent samples t-test validated that the variable of whether German was the first choice of study (GFC) or not (GAC) functioned as a predictor for two of the three motivation dimensions examined (LCAM and SAM). In other words, students who freely choose German are significantly more motivated to study German by an interest in German literature, culture, and art (LCAM) as well as the possibility of studying abroad (SAM) in Germany. The GAC group was slightly more motivated by Business and Career Opportunities (BCOM), but in this case, the t-test could not confirm a dependency relationship with the independent variable.

Furthermore, in both groups, studying abroad was rated as the highest motivation, which is in line with the results of previous studies (Liu 2019b). It should be noted that a study abroad not only serves as a motivating factor, but that furthermore, an “experience of language use abroad, or a lack of it, can represent a significant part of individuals’ L2 self-concept, how they regard themselves as language learners/users and how they approach learning.” (Irie & Ryan 2014: 344)

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The study was able to confirm for the first time that there are two heterogeneous groups which differ significantly in terms of their motivation to study German. However, the extent to which the phenomenon can be generalized is difficult to ascertain, as the approach could be limited to prestigious universities such as PKU and FDU. Students might choose to study an undesired major at a Top 5 university, rather than the subject of choice at a Top 10-20 university. Whether the same motivation applies (rather German at a top 50 university than, for example, law or economics at a top 70 university) seems less plausible, but would have to be evaluated by future research.

However, against the background of the changing German didactics and methods in China (Zhu 2019), it should be taken into account on a curricular as well as the didactic level that teachers are dealing with two groups which exhibit different motivational characteristics. Considering the importance of motivation for successful GFL-learning (Liu & Li 2018; Liu 2019a; Liu 2019b; Chen et al. 2021), the results of this study should be included in further didactic developments. Ultimately they raise the uncomfortable question of how the students enrolled in a German major as an alternative choice (GAC) – who account for more than half of the students – can be motivated once they have started studying.

Reflecting how important the prospect of studying abroad is not only for motivation but also for the self-concept of the learners (Irie & Ryan 2014), these circumstances must be taken into account in didactic considerations about teaching as well. Zhao (2020) argues that the most used GFL-textbooks in China (*Studienweg Deutsch*, by Liang Min et al., and *Klick auf Deutsch*, by Zhu Jianhua et al.) face this opportunity by preparing the students with a communication-oriented approach to their possible experience abroad. This is an assessment I cannot share from my teaching experience with these textbooks. Many passages do not strive for authentic language use, but try to accommodate as much

grammar as possible, as the following excerpt from a listening exercise in the chapter on adjective endings before nouns shows: "Du, Thomas, schau mal da drüben, ist das nicht eine hübsche junge Frau,[...] die mit den langen blonden Haaren und der coolen Sonnenbrille."² (Zhu et al. 2011: 21)

However, bearing in mind how difficult it is to get (especially foreign) textbooks accredited for classroom use in China, it seems given, that such a change must come within the country itself. In my first semester at Fudan University I wrote in the syllabus that I would like to use *Motive A1-B1* (Hueber) for my upcoming class, but was advised by my colleague, I should simply write "own materials" instead, because my class could face bureaucratic difficulties for using a non-accredited book. But as Zhu (2019) affirms, didactic training for GFL-teachers in tertiary education is undergoing strong development and continues to increase, so there should be progress in the area of textbooks in the future as well.

The most important factor in promoting SA-motivation is probably realistic opportunities to study abroad and accessible exchange programs. The double-degree programs of Tongji University with the Friedrich Schiller University Jena and, since 2019, the Philipps University Marburg (Zhao 2020), as well as the double-degree program of Fudan University and the University of Vienna, which is currently being planned, are recent examples of a positive trend.

Furthermore, one can argue that the findings of this study – students of the GFC-group chose German for SAM and LACM reasons, rather than for career opportunities (BCOM) – can be of assistance in the recent discussions in China, if German studies at colleges should aim toward a more economy-oriented, literature-oriented, or translation-oriented approach (Zhang 2019; Zhao 2020; Zhu 2020). Looking at the students' motivation, a change from literature-oriented to economy-oriented curricula would not seem beneficial.

Coming back to the entrance limitations, the question should be raised, if a similar approach (easing the enrollment into top universities for minor language students such as GFL-students) could be advantageous for other countries with entrance limitations: While the entrance policies guarantee that even at the highest ranked universities in China students are trained in German as a foreign language, there is a risk that the students of

² "Hey Thomas, look over there, isn't that a pretty young woman, [...] the one with the long blonde hair and the cool sunglasses."

the GAC group show less motivation and possibly change their major subjects in large numbers after a few semesters. Accordingly, future research could focus on the extent to which motivation develops as the duration of study of the two groups (GAC and GFC) progresses.

In addition, some concerns also emanate from the present study: The most recent surveys on the increasing numbers of German learners in China are from 2020, and since then, the global Covid pandemic has drastically complicated the possibility of studying abroad, which has shown to be the highest motivation to study German (see Graph 2). China has started to open up since December 2022, but at time of writing flight prices are still relatively high and international exchanges are still far less than they used to be.

Furthermore, political relations between China and Germany have cooled noticeably since the end of Angela Merkel's era (Barkin 2021). In addition, Germany's Federal Foreign Office (*Auswärtiges Amt*) has announced that it will drastically cut the budget for German language support abroad, cutting over 6.000 scholarships (Dieamnd 2022), which have been one of the foundations of the success of GFL in China (Bao & Mitschian 2012; Zhao 2020). The extent to which these developments will affect student numbers in China will probably only be determined by the Federal Foreign Office's survey in 2025.

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