

Researcher

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Title of Project

English Learning, Temporal-Spatial Capital, and Family
Language Policy Among Rural Migrant Families in China

Research Supervisor

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**TIRF Research Topic Investigated**

Language Planning and Policy
Teaching Second and Foreign Languages to Young Learners
Plurilingualism and Multilingualism in Educational Contexts

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Bio

Ziwen Mei is a Ph.D. candidate in Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. Her dissertation examines social class dynamics and family language policy among rural migrant families in urban China, focusing on how temporal-spatial capital shapes multilingual practices and educational opportunities. Her broader research interests include multilingual education, digital literacy, language policy, and postqualitative methodologies.

Project Summary

English language education in non-anglophone contexts increasingly relies on families to supplement school-based English learning through homework supervision, reading practice, digital apps, and tutoring (Liang et al., 2025). Yet rural migrant families in China often struggle to meet these expectations because labor schedules, residential insecurity, and policy-based educational exclusion restrict the cultural and material resources needed for home English support (Zheng & Mei, 2021). Meanwhile, they also navigate a linguistic hierarchy in which English and Mandarin are treated as educationally valuable, while heritage topolects associated with rural origins as signs of deficit (Curdts-Christiansen & Gao, 2021).

This project is among the first ethnographic studies to examine how school-based English-learning expectations are taken up, negotiated, or constrained within the family language policies of rural migrant families in urban China. Drawing on six-month fieldwork with five families, the study analyzes interviews with parents, children, and grandparents; observations in home, community, and school-adjacent settings; family audio recordings; children's arts-based artifacts; and home-school documents, such as homework books and reading logs.



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The study asks how migrant families construct beliefs, practices, and management around English, Mandarin, and heritage topolects, and how English-learning expectations enter households with unequal resources. Findings will extend language policy research by showing how structural inequality shapes not only language ideologies and choices, but also families' capacity to enact policy in everyday life. The bottom-up, in-depth findings will inform English language education by identifying where institutional policies misalign with migrant families' lived conditions, and what forms of support may reduce this gap.