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Motivation for learning Chinese as a second foreign language: A case study of first-year university students in Japan

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Unlike in many other countries, Chinese language is one of the most popular languages selected as a foreign language in Japanese universities. Hence, the motivations of Chinese language learners can differ in Japan. Thus, in this study, we investigate the motivations for studying Chinese as a foreign language at Kyushu University, Japan. The aim is to reveal the reasons that students chose Chinese as their foreign language. The students used in this study are first year bachelor students at Kyushu University. Surveys were collected from six different classes over two years. The survey consists of questions about the students' motivations for learning Chinese, their history with Chinese, their impressions about the language, and goals in language learning. This study finds that the main motivations are integrated motivation, instrumental motivation, interest in China, recommendations from others, and similarity to Japanese. In addition, the interest in China and the Chinese language was explored.

1. Introduction

The realm of second language learning motivation is a long-studied field¹. In an early work, Gardner and Lambert² developed a foundation for the theory of second language learning motivation. They identified two motivational factors, integrative and instrumental. Integrative refers to having an interest in learning a language because the learner wants to eventually integrate into the other group. Instrumental motivation is based on the learner wanting to learn the language for a benefit without a strong interest in the culture.

Alternatively, Dörnyei³ proposed the L2 Motivational Self System for language learning. Under this model, language learning is influenced by possible selves and future self-guides. In other words, language learning is motivated by a future self-image. Future self-image motivation is the idea that motivation for learning can come from a possible future self and actions are taken to close the gap between the possible future self and the current state⁴.

Despite the comprehensive exploration of motivational aspects in language learning, a significant gap persists, particularly concerning the motivation behind learning the Chinese language. Consequently, there are relatively fewer studies on Chinese language learning. Moreover, most of these studies examine the motivation of Chinese language learning in the United States of America⁵. Thus, there are even fewer studies from the context of an Asian environment, such as Japan⁶. By shedding light on the motivations of learners in a specific cultural and linguistic context, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on language acquisition, offering insights that may inform educational strategies, curriculum development, and support systems for learners of Chinese in Japan.

1.1. Motivation in Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language

The subject of motivation in learning Chinese as a foreign language has been explored before. For example, Wen and Piao⁵ examined the motivations of university students in the United States of America. They found three motivational factors, intrinsic motivation, instrumental motivation, and future self-image motivation. These findings confirm the theories provided by Gardner and Lambert² and Dörnyei³, but for Chinese language learning.

In particular, the framework of future self-image motivation has also been shown for both heritage and non-heritage Chinese language learners⁷. Comanaru and Noels⁸ also compared heritage and non-heritage Chinese language learners and found that relative to non-heritage learners, heritage learners were motivated due to obligation to their culture. Campbell and Storch⁹ examined the motivation of university students in Australia to learn Chinese and found instrumental motivating factors guiding the students.

1.2. Regional Issues

Chinese is designated as a Less Commonly Taught Language (LCTL) in the United States of America and a Lesser-Used Language (LUL) by the European Union¹⁰. As a LCTL in English speaking countries, Chinese has a low retention rate and can produce negative reactions and low learning motivations in students¹¹. This might be because of the difficulty of learning Chinese as an English speaker^{12,13}.

Conversely, Chinese is one of the most commonly learned foreign languages in Japan, aside from English. Unlike most other foreign languages, Chinese shares characters with Japanese, which removes some of the difficulty. Therefore, the typical theory of language learning for Chinese is might not necessarily the same. Thus, it is important to study the motivations for learning Chinese from a Japanese student's point of view in order to be more effective in Chinese language education for Japanese students.

However, compared to English, there are relatively few studies about learning other foreign languages, such as Chinese, in Japan. In one study, Ren⁶ found that one additional reason Japanese university students choose Chinese as a foreign language is because of their familiarity with Chinese characters. Ren also found that motivation can be influenced by another person. An¹⁴ found a type of motivation of Chinese language learners in Japan labeled, "negative motivation." This type of motivation is based on negative reasons, such as ease of getting credit or appearing intelligent to others. However, Ren argued that the negative motivation would be better labeled as comparative motivation which stems from comparisons to other languages⁶.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Participants

The participants of the survey were first year bachelor students at Kyushu University, Japan. The participants were from five different classes in 2021 and 2023. There were 208 responses in total. Of the respondents, 5.8% of them have studied Chinese previously and it was the first instruction about Chinese for 94.2% of the students. Also, it should be noted that during this time, the students are obligated to take a foreign

language class, but they do not necessarily need to select Chinese as the foreign language.

In addition, the participants were taken from the same introductory course on Chinese language. While the students are not all necessarily of Japanese heritage, the course is taught in Japanese and they are all regular students at Kyushu University.

2.2. Instruments and Procedure

To understand the motivations for studying Chinese as a foreign language, a survey was provided to the students. The survey was given to the students during the first lecture before instruction began. This was done in order to prevent the lectures from influencing the motivation of the students.

The questionnaire consists of ten questions, including three selection questions, three multiple selection questions, and four text response questions. It was adapted from Zhang¹⁵. The details of the questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

3. Results

3.1. Interest in China and Chinese Language

Table 1 Experience in Chinese Language Learning (Q1) Versus Interest in China (Q2)

	Q1: Yes	Q1: No	Q1: No answer	Total
Q2: I think so	10	121	0	131
Q2: I don't think so	1	7	0	8
Q2: I can't say either way	1	68	0	69
Q2: No answer	0	0	0	0
Total	12	196	0	

Table 2 Experience in Chinese Language Learning (Q1) Versus Interest in Chinese Language (Q4)

	Q1: Yes	Q1: No	Q1: No answer	Total
Q4: I think so	10	106	0	116
Q4: I don't think so	0	13	0	13
Q4: I can't say either way	2	73	0	75
Q4: No answer	0	4	0	4
Total	12	196	0	

Part of the questionnaire was to gauge the interest in China and the Chinese language. Table 1 compares

the respondents' previous experience in Chinese language learning and their interest in China. Table 2 compares their experience to their interest in the Chinese language.

Of the respondents taking the introductory course, the majority have an interest in China and the Chinese language. As shown in Table 1, only 3.8% do not have an interest in China. This is consistent with both respondents who have and have not studied the Chinese language previously. Comparatively, there are many respondents who have not studied Chinese who responded "I can't say either way" to the question about interest in China. Interest in the Chinese language follows a similar trend (Table 2).

Table 3 Interest in China (Q2) Versus Interest in Chinese Language (Q4)

	Q2: I think so	Q2: I don't think so	Q2: I can't say either way	Q2: No answer
Q4: I think so	99	1	16	0
Q4: I don't think so	5	6	2	0
Q4: I can't say either way	24	1	50	0
Q4: No answer	3	0	1	0

It is interesting to examine the difference in populations between the people who are interested in China versus those who are interested in the Chinese language. Table 3 compares the responses to Question 2 and Question 4. The table reveals that of the respondents that were interested in China, there were many that are not as interested in the language.

Table 4 Reasons for Having an Interest in China. Respondents Can Have Multiple Reasons.

Category	Number	Percent
Economy	35	26.7%
Culture	28	21.4%
History	26	19.9%
Food	19	14.5%
Large population	15	11.5%
Proximity to Japan	11	8.4%
Politics	10	7.6%
Chinese media	9	6.9%
Technology	5	3.8%

Environment	4	3.1%
Kanji/Chinese characters	3	2.3%
People	3	2.3%
Family or Friends	3	2.3%
Martial Arts	2	1.5%
Travel	2	1.5%
Companies	1	0.8%
Sports	1	0.8%
Pandas	1	0.8%

There were a variety of responses to the question, “What parts of China are you interested in?” (Q3). As shown in Table 4, the most common responses were interest in the Chinese economy, culture, history, and food. Culture, history, and food are typical reasons for being interested in another country. However, Chinese economy, having a large population, and being in close proximity to Japan are reasons more specific to China.

As for interest in the Chinese language, the reasons were similar to interest in China. Most of the interest in the language comes from the shared Chinese characters of the two languages, wanting to communicate with Chinese people, and interest in Chinese media. For example, one respondent wrote, “I thought it was interesting that although the characters used are similar to those in Japan, the grammar and pronunciation are completely different.” In another response, “I’m also interested in Chinese entertainment, and when I watched the video, I felt like I could understand it at first glance because it used kanji, but there were a lot of things that were used differently from Japanese, so I didn’t understand it, so I wanted to understand it.” From these responses, it is clear that many Japanese university students have an interest in the shared script between the two languages.

3.2. Reason for Taking Chinese Classes

When asked, “Why do you take Chinese classes?” (Q6), 25.0% responded with “It’s a compulsory subject,” 30.8% responded with “It was recommended to me by others,” 18.3% responded with “It seems easier to get credits compared to other foreign languages,” 9.1% responded with “It’s advantageous for getting a job,” 43.8% responded with “I’m interested in China,” and 10.6% had other reasons. Thus, the most common reason for learning Chinese is due to having an interest in China and the second highest was a recommendation from others. Interestingly, unlike many other studies, the instrumental option, “It’s advantageous for getting a job,” was the least selected reason for learning Chinese.

Some of the other reasons include knowing people or having friends that are Chinese, thinking it will be useful in the future, and China having a large population. Through these results, we can see that traditional motivations, such as instrumental and integral motivation, are represented. In addition, as suggested by Ren⁶ many Chinese language learners in Japan also chose Chinese due to the similarity of the languages and due to

influences from others.

3.3. Goals in Taking Chinese

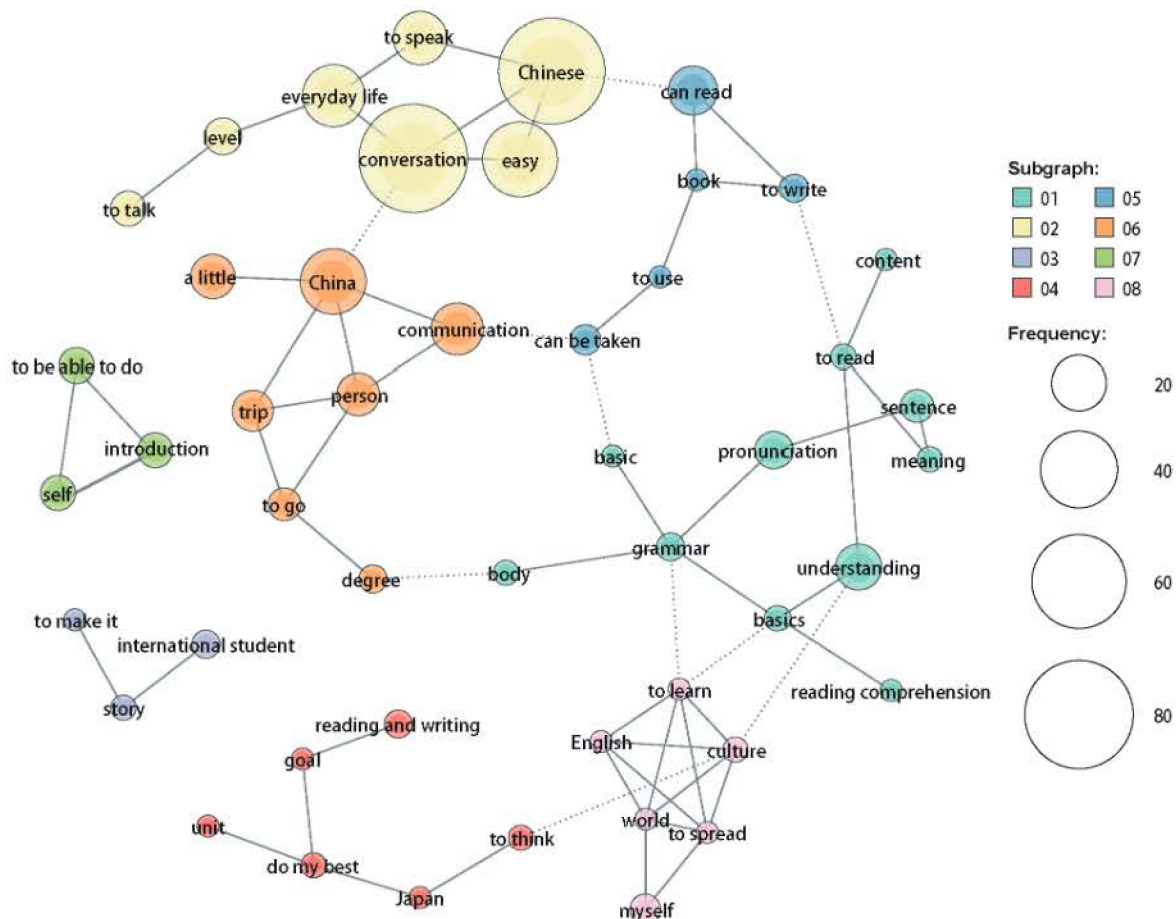


Figure 1 Co-occurrence network of Q9. The co-occurrence was calculated based on the Japanese text and translated for the figure.

Question 9 asked, “What do you want to achieve by studying Chinese for a year?” Based on this question, the co-occurrence network in Figure 1 was calculated. It is important to note that the text was analyzed in Japanese but only translated to English for the figure. The figure is divided into eight subgraphs. The first subgraph relates to understanding aspects of the Chinese language, the second relates to speaking Chinese, the third is about being an international student, the fourth is about goals, the fifth is about reading and writing, the sixth is about visiting China, the seventh is about doing a self-introduction, and the final is about culture and the world.

The results of Figure 1 reveal a few common goals that the respondents want to accomplish. Their responses can be grouped into visiting China, reading or writing Chinese, talking Chinese, and learning certain

aspects of Chinese. By far the most common responses were responses like, “I want to be able to have a conversation with Chinese people,” “I want to be able to have simple conversations,” and “I want to be able to introduce myself in Chinese.” Besides communication, traveling to China and being able to read Chinese media were common responses.

According to Question 7, “What do you want to focus on learning through Chinese classes?”, 69.2% responded with “Conversation,” 23.1% responded with “Grammar,” 26.4% responded with “Reading comprehension,” 36.1% responded with “Culture,” 4.3% responded with “Test preparation,” and none for “Other.” These results confirm the results from Q9. The main objective of the respondents is to be able to converse in Chinese.

3.4. Preconceived Image of Chinese

The final topic asked in the questionnaire was about the students’ image of the Chinese language. The responses were 17.8% for “Chinese characters are difficult,” 89.9% for “Chinese pronunciation is difficult,” 5.8% for “Chinese grammar is difficult”, and only one response was filled in for “Other.” The response was that there are “diverse dialects.” According to Yang¹², the two most difficult aspects of learning Chinese as a foreign language for English speaking students are the tones and the characters. However, because Japanese students are already familiar with Chinese characters due to the usage of Kanji in the Japanese language, we could confirm that the respondents did not as often have a preconceived image that Chinese characters are difficult. This is an aspect that is unique to Japanese learners.

3.5. Comparison to Learning English

Table 5 Pearson correlation between being interested in Chinese language (Q4) and fondness of English (Q10).

	Q4: I think so	Q4: I don't think so	Q4: I can't say either way	Q4: No answer
Q10: Like English	0.2536	-0.0907	-0.2538	0.1302
Q10: Dislike English	-0.1169	0.1958	0.0377	-0.0541
Q10: Neither like or dislike	-0.1166	0.1277	0.0653	-0.0315
Q10: No mention	-0.1037	-0.1033	0.1801	-0.0722

We compared the participants’ interest in Chinese to English. Table 5 shows the correlation between their interest in Chinese and their fondness of English. For the table, responses from the question Q10, “Do you like English? Have you ever taken any English classes that you found interesting or useful? If so, please write the details.” were tallied into four categories, one where the respondents said that they like English, one where they dislike English, one where they could go either way, and one where there was no mention of like or dislike.

Table 5 shows that there is a correlation between liking English and being interested in the Chinese language. Interestingly, there is also a correlation between disliking English and not being interested in Chinese.

Thus, there is a relationship between liking English and Chinese. This indicates that there might be a type of person who likes foreign languages in general.

Question 10 also asked about activities that were effective in learning English. The most common responses were mentioning media-related activities, such as watching movies or listening to music. Other than media-related activities, there were many mentions about active activities, such as presentations, reading out loud, conversations, and “English-speaking language games.”

4. Conclusion

This paper explored the motivations of learning Chinese language in a Japanese university. Specifically, a questionnaire was given to six classes of first year bachelor students at Kyushu University, Japan, taking an introductory course on Chinese language. Using the questionnaire, response analysis and text mining was used.

From the responses, we could identify common factors contributing to motivation and interest in learning Chinese. The motivation in Chinese learning for Japanese students could be summarized as:

1. Integrated motivation
2. Instrumental motivation
3. Interest in China
4. Recommendations from others
5. Similarity to Japanese

Compared to other studies that examine Chinese learning motivation, our results showed much less instrumental motivation. The interest in China stems from an interest in China’s economy, culture, history, food, and due to China’s large population.

Understanding the motivations behind learning Chinese among Japanese students reveals a distinct perspective compared to Western contexts. These findings illuminate the intricate motivations driving Japanese learners in their pursuit of mastering the Chinese language. It underscores the necessity to tailor educational strategies and curricula in alignment with the distinct motivations and aspirations of Japanese learners. The revelation of nuanced motivational patterns necessitates a reevaluation of pedagogical approaches, emphasizing conversational proficiency and leveraging the shared script advantage.

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Appendix

The questionnaire used in this study (Translated from Japanese to English). The questionnaire was adapted from Zhang¹⁵.

1. Have you ever studied Chinese?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. No answer
2. Are you interested in China?
 - a. I think so
 - b. I don't think so
 - c. I can't say either way
 - d. No answer
3. If you selected "I think so" to the above question, please answer the following question. What parts of China are you interested in? (Please write freely.)
4. Are you interested in Chinese language?
 - a. I think so
 - b. I don't think so
 - c. I can't say either way
 - d. No answer
5. If you selected "I think so" to the above question, please answer the following question. What parts of China are you interested in? (Please write freely.)
6. Why do you take Chinese classes? (Multiple answers allowed.)
 - a. It's a compulsory subject.
 - b. It was recommended to me by others.
 - c. It seems easier to get credits compared to other foreign languages.
 - d. It's advantageous for getting a job.
 - e. I'm interested in China.
 - f. Other (Fill in the blank)
7. What do you want to focus on learning through Chinese classes? (Multiple answers allowed.)
 - a. Conversation
 - b. Grammar
 - c. Reading comprehension
 - d. Culture
 - e. Test preparation for obtaining Chinese language qualifications
 - f. Other (Fill in the blank)

8. What is your image of Chinese? (Multiple answers allowed.)
 - a. Chinese characters are difficult.
 - b. Chinese pronunciation is difficult.
 - c. Chinese grammar is difficult.
 - d. Other (Fill in the blank)
9. What do you want to achieve by studying Chinese for a year? (Please write freely.)
10. Do you like English? Have you ever taken any English classes that you found interesting or useful? If so, please write the details.