Motivations, Beliefs, and Chinese Language Learning: A Phenomenological Study in a Canadian University

Xuping Sun

Abstract

Internationally, more and more people are learning Chinese as a second or foreign language. Many studies (Gardner, 1958; Spolsky, 1969; Dörnyei, 1994; Oxford & Shearin, 1996; Williams & Burden, 1997) have shown that learning motivation plays an important role in language learning, while language belief (Horwitz, 1988) determines the strategies and efforts learners are going to put into language learning. Both motivation and belief are key factors in successful language learning. This research carries out an investigation of the phenomenon of Chinese language learning in the Canadian context. Through in-depth, open-ended individual interviews with six students who are learning Chinese in a Canadian university, the researcher intends to listen to their actual experiences of Chinese language learning in order to examine their motivations for learning this language and to describe their beliefs about this language. The results show Chinese language learners have a variety of motivations to learn the Chinese language, from cultural interest, communication with native Chinese speakers, travel, friendship, to job opportunities. These motivations come
from their real life experiences with the Chinese people around them. As for the Chinese language, not all students think it is difficult. All participants in this study believe listening and speaking is more important than reading and writing. They adopted many learning strategies to learn Chinese. The implications for Chinese language instructors as to how to motivate students and for the Chinese language students motivating themselves are also discussed.

**Key words:** Learning motivation, language beliefs, Chinese language learning

**Introduction**

Internationally, more and more people are learning Chinese as a second or foreign language. Many studies (Gardner, 1958; Spolsky, 1969; Dörnyei, 1994; Oxford & Shearin, 1996; Williams & Burden, 1997) have shown that learning motivation plays an important role in language learning. Language belief (Horwitz, 1988) also determines the strategies and efforts learners put into language learning. Both motivation and belief are key factors in successful language learning.

Some of the literature studied asked why people are learning Chinese as a second or foreign language (Wen, 1997; Yang, 2003). However, little literature explored the motivation and beliefs about Chinese language learning in a Canadian context. Research about language beliefs has been conducted almost exclusively with students
of French, German and Spanish background, while the beliefs of learners of other languages - such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Russian - have not been the object of any published investigation, as claimed by Rifkin (2000). So why do students in a Canadian university choose to learn the Chinese language and what are their language beliefs about Chinese? These questions are crucial to successfully teach the Chinese language learner. Taking the opportunity of doing a Master’s degree in Canada, I would like to find out about Canadian university students’ motivations and beliefs about Chinese language learning.

**Research Purpose**

My research has two objectives. The first is to examine the motivations of those learning Chinese in a Canadian university. The second is to describe what their language beliefs are about the Chinese language; for example, how difficult they think the Chinese language is.

**Literature Review**

**Research on Learning Motivation**

There has been substantial research conducted on language learning motivation (Gardner, 1958; Dörnyei, 1994; Spolsky, 1969). As Van Lier (1996) stated, motivation is a very important, if not the most important factor, in language learning (p. 98). Motivation has been shown to have a significant impact not only on learning strategies, interaction with native speakers, how input is received, and the
perseverance and maintenance of language learning, but also on ultimate proficiency attainment (Dörnyei, 1994; Ely, 1986; Gardner, 1985; Oxford & Shearin, 1996; Williams & Burden, 1997).

Research on second language (L2) learning motivation between the 1960s and 1990s were dominated by Gardner and Lambert (1959), who were the originators in this area. The famous dichotomy of integrative and instrumental orientation came from their study. They first suggested that variables other than language aptitude were involved (p. 266). They used attitudes as a motivational construct and argued that attitudes towards a cultural group would at least partly determine one’s success in learning a new language (p. 267). After 12 years of research interest, their book “Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning” (1972) answered the question of why some people can learn a foreign language quickly from a socio-psychological perspective. They think that a learner’s motivation is determined by his attitudes toward the target language group and his orientation toward the learning task. The orientation could be instrumental if the purpose of language study reflected the more utilitarian value of linguistic achievement (p. 3), such as getting ahead in one’s occupation. In contrast, the orientation could be integrative if the student wanted to learn more about the cultural community because he was interested in it in an open-minded way, to the point of eventually being accepted as a member of that other group (p. 3). Gardner and Lambert suggested that individuals with an
integrative orientation would demonstrate greater motivational effort in learning an L2, thus achieving greater L2 competence.

In the 1990s, researchers Dörnyei (1994), Crooks and Schmidt (1991), and Oxford and Shearin (1994) began searching for a broader, more pragmatic, education-centred approach to motivation study. They argued there was much emphasis placed on attitudes and social psychological aspects. When teachers said a student was motivated, they were not usually concerning themselves with the student’s reasons for studying, but were observing that the student did study, or at least engaged in teacher–desired behaviour in the classroom and possibly outside it. Most teachers wish to motivate students and attempted to do so in a variety of ways. The emphasis in Gardner’s model was grounded in the social milieu rather than in the foreign language classroom (Dörnyei, 1992), which “does not do full justice to the way SL teachers have used the term motivation” (Crooks & Schmidt, 1991). Oxford and Shearin reopened the research agenda and expanded the theoretical framework on motivation to foster further understanding of L2 motivation from an educational perspective. They did not intend to overturn the ideas nor denigrate the major contributions of researchers such as Gardner, Lambert, Lalonde and others who powerfully brought motivational issues to the attention of those in the second-language field. They wanted to maintain the best of the existing second-language learning motivation theory and push its parameters outward. Therefore they offered motivation material that was well known in the fields of
general, educational and cognitive developmental psychology but had not yet been
directly applied to the L2 field.

From the above review we can see that motivations vary depending on the L2 learning
context. There are a whole range of orientations in a world language like English, so
what about orientations in learning a language like Chinese in the Canadian context?

There are some articles about the motivation to learn other languages besides English.
Mandell (2002) concluded after his study in university-level Spanish learners that the
majority of the beginning Spanish learners were enrolled in the language classes to
satisfy the institutional requirement. Hasseinali (2006) investigated the initial
motivation of Arabic language learners at a major university in the United States and
found three major types of orientations, namely instrumental orientations,
identification orientations, and travel and culture orientations. In “Orientations to
Learning German” (Noels, 2005), the results showed that heritage language learners
were more likely than non-heritage learners to learn German because it was an
important aspect of their self-concept. Wen’s (1997) research, where she investigated
the motivational factors of students who were from Asian and Asian-American
backgrounds and learning Chinese at American universities, indicated that an interest
in Chinese culture and the desire to know one’s own heritage and culture prompted
students to learn Chinese. There are different orientations in different languages in
different learning contexts. Therefore, what about the motivations of Chinese language learners in a Canadian context?

The exact nature of the social and pragmatic dimensions of L2 motivation is always dependent on who learns what languages and where (Dörnyei, 1992). As we all know, Chinese is commonly perceived as one of the hardest languages and it is difficult to learn for many English speakers. What are Canadian students’ opinions about this language? How do they learn this language? What is the proficiency they wish to reach? I want to find out about their language beliefs.

Research on Language Beliefs

Elaine Horwitz (1988) developed the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), and many researchers use it to solicit student opinions on issues of language learning. I will also use it for my guiding questions, but I will change parts of it to fit my research issues on Chinese language learning.

BALLI examines student beliefs in five areas: “1) difficulty of language learning; 2) foreign language aptitude; 3) the nature of language learning; 4) learning and communication strategies; 5) motivations and expectations” (p. 284). Each area has a different number of items. Regarding the difficulty of language learning, there are comments like “I believe I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well” and “it is easier to read and write this language than to speak and understand it”. For
foreign language aptitude, there are questions such as: is it easier for children or adults to learn a foreign language, and are women better than men at learning a foreign language?

In the study, Horwitz (1988) investigated students who were learning German, Spanish and French at the University of Texas. These three languages belong to the same linguistic system. However, Chinese is orthographic and is regarded as one of the most difficult languages to learn. Students who are learning Chinese may hold different beliefs once they are actually studying this language. Rifkin (2000) indicated that research language belief has been conducted almost exclusively with students of French, German and Spanish; the beliefs of learners and instructors of other languages - such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Russian - have not been the object of any published investigation. Therefore, he claimed it cannot be assumed that learners of less commonly taught languages have beliefs similar to those held by learners of French, German and Spanish (p. 395). Less commonly taught languages here include Chinese.

Also, language beliefs changed over time as students made progress or were at different levels. Horwitz (1988) examined only first-semester language students and thus gave a static view of students’ beliefs. It is important to distinguish between different beliefs students held at various levels of study and during different ages/stages. Rifkin (2000) also indicated that “none of the published studies on learner
beliefs about foreign language learning has examined the beliefs of learners not in the first year of instruction. Learners change by virtue of the instruction they receive and we can only hope that the beliefs of students in intermediate, advanced, or even graduate level classes are different from the beliefs held by their peers in the introductory courses” (p. 395). Therefore, I chose participants in this study from different levels. There are not only participants from the first year of the Chinese class, but also ones from the second and third years. By doing so, I hope I can get different beliefs from different levels.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

I interviewed six Canadian university students selected from the Asian Studies Centre at the University of Manitoba, a mid-west Canadian university. With three levels of classes, I chose two participants from each level. It was assumed the different levels provide different perceptions, and what is the whole perception? Participation was voluntary. Informed consent including an explanation of what the research was about, why I wished to interview them, what would be involved, and what would be done with the information obtained was sent beforehand so my participants had an opportunity to ask about the meaning and implications of any statement. It was my goal to listen carefully to their lived experiences. I did not seek a representative sample from the language program, but wanted to gain a range of perspective experiences. Among these six participants, there were two pure Canadian girls who
were born and raised in Canada, two heritage students with Chinese family backgrounds, one female student from Japan and one male student with a Jamaican origin. In the next chapter, I have provided detailed information about my six participants to give readers a vivid picture of these students and thus a better understanding of their motivation and beliefs about the Chinese language.

Procedures of the Study

The recruitment of the participants took a long time as I worked as a sessional instructor and TA at the university. This provided conflict between the participants and myself as a researcher. After I finished my teaching at the beginning of April, I started my recruiting job. First, I wrote a permission letter with my proposed research outline to the Head of the Asian Studies Centre. After permission to interview the students was obtained, I visited the instructor’s office and briefly explained my research, asking her to invite her students to participate in my study. I asked interested students to sign and leave contact information on a volunteer sheet that was sealed in an envelope by the last student in the class and handed to the instructor. I went to pick up the sealed envelope from the instructor after the class. I emailed all students individually, gave them a few more details about the time, and invited them to respond with suggested dates and times for the first interview. In my email I stated that volunteers would be selected on a “first-come-first-served” basis, so the first students to respond would become the participants of my study.
Six students were interviewed with the same set of 15 open-ended questions. The interviews were tape-recorded and lasted no longer than 60 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, all participants was offered the opportunity to select a pseudonym to protect their identities in the following transcripts and written documentation.

After each of the first set of interviews was completed, I transcribed the tapes. Through email, I sent each participant a copy of the first interview draft plus a draft of my interpretation. The participants was invited to member-check their interview and draft to ensure they were correctly quoted. Also, the member-check of my transcript helped me understand how and if each participant accepted my notes as an accurate description of their interview.

**Findings**

There are two parts in this section. The first part is my discoveries about motivations; the second part is my discoveries regarding beliefs.

**Motivations for Chinese Language Learning**

I asked the six students this question: “Why do you choose to learn Chinese?” They had different answers and different stories. Thus motivation means different things to them. I will generalize that there are six different dominant motivations to learn Chinese according to my research. The motivations are cultural interest, travel, friendship, job opportunities, heritage language advantage and communication.
**Cultural interest.** The intrinsic motivation of learning Chinese culture is a significant predictor for students to decide to learn the Chinese language (Wen, 1997: 242). In my interview with Sarah, she had a strong motivation that came from inside of her. Her decision to learn Chinese was from her personal interest in the Chinese culture. She had the strongest motivation to learn Chinese among my six interviewees, and she achieved the most progress during her first year of Chinese language learning. She was the first one to respond to my email to participate in the interview. She was excited when I interviewed her and her answers to my questions were the longest. Through the following excerpt we could feel her fondness towards the Chinese culture.

_I really enjoyed the hospitality I got and received (from my boyfriend’s parents). They are very warm. They really welcomed me and they really want me to come around often. I love the food. It’s something I don’t really find at home. My parents are so strict when it comes to school. I appreciate Chinese parents who really want their children to succeed and things like that. Our relationship ended a while ago but it did not ruin my interest in Chinese culture. I love it so much. I try to figure out why. I guess the cultural aspect has so many meanings, the deep meanings. The culture has so many relationships to what I believe in. So that's why I found the culture fascinating._ (Transcript, P 3, Lines 35-42)
**Communication.** Communication is the basic and first stage when people choose to learn a language. Language is to be used for communication. Research shows that most students learn a language to communicate. Angela was the student who needed Chinese strongly in order to live in China. She told me she felt frustrated when she did not know any Chinese.

*In 2006 I was in Nanjing. I was living there and teaching English. I was getting really frustrated, because the taxi drivers were talking to me and I couldn't understand them. Finally I said okay. I went to my boss at the company that I worked for. I said you need to teach me how to say “I come from Canada. I am teaching here.” Because I know the taxi driver is asking me these things, but I don’t know the answers. That’s the first time I said I have to learn Chinese. (Transcript, P 1, Lines 6-10)*

Angela also needed to learn Chinese when she made a Chinese boyfriend.

*One big reason was that my boyfriend’s parents don’t speak English, so I want to talk to them. I have to speak Chinese with them. (Transcript, P 1, Lines 29-30)*

Whether to talk to the taxi driver or speak with her boyfriend’s parents, Angela needed Chinese to communicate in her daily life.
**Travel.** As a university student in his second year, Travis was learning Chinese for travelling, and this is no surprise. As he knows more about the world, going around the world is a dream of most university students. For Travis, travelling to get to know more people was especially important to him because he was majoring in psychology. He studied people. This is what he said in the interview:

*I want to travel a lot. In psychology during the first year you learn more about everyone, everyone around the world. I want to travel every place to learn how they are.* (Transcript, P 6, Lines 27-29)

**Friendship.** Being a Japanese girl who studied in a Canadian university, friendship was of great importance to Kori.

*I like to study languages. I know Japanese anyway. I think in the world, except for English, the second most important language is Chinese. The first reason is because of the amount of Chinese people there are. Second, I am a university student. I meet so many Chinese students. I think if I know Chinese and can speak Chinese, it would be good for my friends in Canada.* (Transcript, P 7, Lines 42-45)

**Heritage language advantage.** Susan was a Chinese heritage language learner. In a formal language-learning setting, students who were motivated to receive a high achievement score also highly valued the acquisition of language skills. As a result,
they were likely to be actively engaged in their learning and to achieve their goals.

Susan was this kind of student.

To be honest, first I think it will be easier. I am of Chinese background. Second is I want to learn it so I can understand more language on TV shows, news, and dramas. I want to know what they are saying without relying on English subtitles. (Transcript, P 9, Lines 9-12)

Job opportunities. Amber was the other Chinese language heritage learner. However, she did not mention her advantage in Chinese language leaning. She was thinking more about her career since she was to graduate soon.

Because of my Chinese friends, if I want to work later, China is becoming very much bigger. I want to do internationally, and Mandarin will be helpful. (Transcript, P 10, Lines 28-30)

Chinese language learners enrolled in Chinese class for a variety of reasons. These motivations are not necessarily characterized as either integrative motivation or instrumental motivation. They could overlap. A student with an integrative motivation of being interested in Chinese culture could have an instrumental motivation of finding a good job by learning Chinese. As mentioned above, six major motivations
were found: cultural interest, communication, travel, friendship, heritage language advantage and job opportunities.

Beliefs about Chinese language learning

Difficulty of the Chinese Language

When it comes to Chinese, most people think the language is very difficult, like Greek. So my first concern when I designed this research questions was: do you think Chinese is a difficult language? To my big surprise, not all people thought Chinese was difficult. Let’s see how my two first-year students answered this question.

Angela:

I guess some parts are really difficult. Some parts are easy. One of the things that I think is really hard about learning Chinese is that you cannot look it up in a dictionary. You see a sign but you cannot look it up in a dictionary very easily. When you learn another language with letters and alphabets, it is easy to look it up in a dictionary. This is what the sign means. But in Chinese, that's a pretty picture. I don’t know, I think it is really hard when it comes to read and write Chinese, because you can’t just figure it out by how the words sound. You cannot guess. Either you know it or you don't know it. You can’t make it up. But I think learning to speak Chinese, it is not actually so hard. Chinese doesn’t have such a complicated grammar - things with verbs as English or Spanish or French or something. You can say I eat apple. You know “I” and you know the verb and you know the noun. You can make a sentence
and people would understand you. But if you did that in English, nobody would understand you and it would be very strange. I eat an apple, I ate or I will. People figure it out but in English, it’s when and why, give me more information. With verbs, Chinese is much easier. (Transcript, P 2, Lines 25-37)

Sarah:
Before, hard. I look at these characters, what the world is going on here? Everybody is telling me it is so hard and so hard. That was my feeling before. I don’t think it is difficult anymore. The feeling disappeared. But it is not easy. It is challenging but not difficult. I don’t know why people say it is so hard. It is simpler than the English language, because the English language has so many grammar things in it. English has too many verbs. English is so hard. (Transcript, P 4-5, Lines 41-44, 1)

To Angela and Sarah, the Chinese language was not that difficult as they thought before they started learning it. My understanding is that since they expected the Chinese language to be difficult and the introductory course was easy to learn, that is why they had this feeling. Did the intermediate students have the same feeling?

Travis:
It is getting tougher. There are a lot of characters to remember. Last year I cannot remember how many. Getting to be a lot. You really practice. You forgot the old one. If there is Pinyin, I can read them. You only remember the new one. I need to practice.
Not really. The only reason that it is hard is there are more characters. (Transcript, P 6, Lines 38-42)

Kori:

The first year, not very difficult. Cannot say easy but not difficult. Second year is more difficult. (Transcript, P 8, Lines 17-18)

As the Chinese language level increased, the Chinese language learners felt the Chinese language was getting difficult. Was this true for the advance level students?

Susan:

I think actually it is difficult. I would say it is the most difficult language to learn. Because it is not everything when you learn the character. The actions are that you memorize the character. It is not like English where you can sound out the letter together about the word and figure it out. You actually have to memorize everything. If you were taught 2000 words, I can only know 2000. (Transcript, P 9, Lines 37-41)

Amber:

Maybe because I speak Cantonese, it is easier for me to learn. But I think in general, Chinese is very difficult because there are so many words, so many characters, and grammar and stuff like that. (Transcript, P 10, Lines 39-41)
As mentioned by my interviewees, I agree that as the level increases, people’s beliefs toward the difficulty of the language changed, from not difficult to getting difficult to very difficult.

**Conclusion and Implications**

The motivations for Chinese language learners to enrol in Chinese language courses include a variety of reasons: cultural interest, communication, travel, friendship, job opportunities and heritage language advantage. No big differences were found between the heritage and non-heritage students on their motivations to learn Chinese. Cultural interest came from the beginning level students, while the advanced level students had more practical motivations with two students hoping to find good jobs by knowing Chinese.

Chinese language learners hold a variety of beliefs towards the Chinese language and Chinese language learning. For the participants from the beginning level, they did not think the Chinese language was difficult. Clearly we teachers should continue to provide strong encouragement to our students, but we should also help them meet their expectations by presenting specific course objectives. By listening closely to them, it may be possible to significantly motivate our students to achieve their goals.

**Implications**

The findings of this study present three implications.
The first implication is for recruiters of Chinese language programs. The results show that the Chinese language is not as difficult as many people think. A recruitment approach should be reconsidered when attracting students to register. Instead of using culture to attract students, they should indicate that learning Chinese is not like learning Greek, which astounded many students who registered for this language program.

The second implication is for students and to how to motivate themselves. First, for students without the heritage background, they dream of being able to speak the language in a few weeks. They are generally unaware of the demands that will be placed on them. The Chinese writing system is very different from English. It is possible that many Chinese language beginners are fascinated by the writing system but are not aware of the amount of time required to learn Chinese. Quite often, they are excited about learning Chinese and begin their studies with enthusiasm. But this excitement and enthusiasm do not last very long. Many teachers made the observation that although the students are initially very enthusiastic about learning the language, their enthusiasm wanes before the end of the first year. Students who study Chinese for one year gradually understand the importance of memorizing the characters and develop certain strategies to memorize them. At this stage, strategies and effort become the important factors to language achievement. Language learners should adjust their goals and develop new expectations and make more effort.
For students with an Asian background, such as Japanese, Korean or a Chinese person who speaks Cantonese, they enrol in the Chinese language course for main two reasons. First, they are interested in their own Asian culture. Second, they expect this course may be less demanding that other courses because they know how to write characters. However, they may find a big difference between what they know and what a formal university Chinese course requires. Students should realize the great commitment the course requires and should be willing to make considerable effort in the time-consuming process of Chinese language learning.

The third implication is for teachers and to how to motivate students. For non-heritage students, maintaining their interest in the Chinese culture motivates them to learn the language. Teach them the basic spoken Chinese language and protocol and encourage them to use it by actively interacting with Chinese people around them. Make learning Chinese characters more fun and easy to remember, and encourage students to write and practice more often as there is no easy way to remember these characters except by memorizing. Create a more authentic Chinese learning environment such as students speaking Chinese when eating Chinese food at lunch time. For heritage students, provide them with more challenging homework. Rather than memorizing characters, they should be assigned to make sentences with new words or even write small essays or diaries in Chinese. Put higher expectations on their performance since too-easy classes will cause them to lose their motivation. Ask them to adjust their
learning goals to higher levels, such as the academic goal of learning Chinese. Let them know that learning Chinese is not just for communication but can be for a professional career.

References


In C. Roberts (Ed.), *Working papers in applied linguistics, 4*, 43–69.


