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From "Instrumental Motivation" to "Cultural Identity": A Study on the Dynamic Evolution of Chinese Learning Motivation among Belt and Road International Students in China—A Case Study of Jilin Engineering Normal University

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Received: 17 July 2025

Revised: 22 July 2025

Accepted: 12 August 2025

Published: 14 August 2025



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Abstract: This study focuses on international students from countries along the "Belt and Road" initiative, enrolled at Jilin Engineering Normal University, examining their evolving motivations for learning Chinese. The research employs qualitative methods to explore how these students' motivations shift from "instrumental motivation" to "cultural identity." Initially, international students are primarily driven by instrumental goals, such as improving academic performance and enhancing career prospects. However, as they engage in various Chinese cultural practices, integrate into the Chinese language environment, and establish relationships with both local teachers and peers, their motivation gradually transitions toward more integrative goals. These include developing a deeper interest in Chinese culture and experiencing emotional identification with the language and society. Over time, this transformation leads to the formation of a stable cultural identity. This identity is manifested in concrete actions, such as the decision to pursue career opportunities in China post-graduation and actively participating in the dissemination of Chinese culture. The findings of this study offer valuable insights for universities and educational institutions seeking to refine their Chinese language programs for international students, enhance their intercultural communication strategies, and improve the overall integration experience for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Belt and Road; international students in China; Chinese learning motivation; instrumental motivation; cultural identity; dynamic evolution

1. Introduction

The educational collaboration between China and countries along the "Belt and Road" initiative has significantly deepened in recent years, leading to a continuous increase in the number of international students studying in China. This growing international presence highlights the importance of understanding the factors that influence their learning experiences and intercultural adaptation. One of the most crucial factors affecting international students' academic success and cultural integration is their motivation for learning Chinese. While much research has been devoted to the study of motivation, most studies have focused on its static aspects, overlooking the dynamic nature of motivation, especially in the context of international students under the "Belt and Road" initiative.

Motivation is commonly classified into two categories: instrumental and integrative. Instrumental motivation is typically driven by practical goals such as acquiring academic

qualifications, securing better career opportunities, and enhancing social mobility. On the other hand, integrative motivation reflects a deeper connection, where learners actively embrace the culture and values of the target language community. While both types of motivation play a role in language acquisition, the dynamic shifts between these motivations—particularly over time and through exposure to culture—remain underexplored.

Jilin Engineering Normal University, as a key institution, has been recruiting international students from countries along the "Belt and Road" since 2019. The university's diverse student body, their unique learning experiences, and their decisions to stay in China for further career development provide a typical and valuable case for examining the evolution of Chinese learning motivation [1]. By tracking the educational journeys of these students, this study aims to uncover the trajectory of their motivation, identifying the key factors that drive changes in their learning goals and behaviors. The findings of this research will provide both theoretical insights and practical guidance for improving the quality of education and enhancing the intercultural integration of international students in China.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Classic Theoretical Framework of Learning Motivation*

Motivation in second language acquisition is often conceptualized through two key categories: instrumental and integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation is primarily driven by practical objectives such as obtaining qualifications, securing career advancement, or improving one's economic prospects. In contrast, integrative motivation involves a deeper, emotional connection to the language and culture, where learners actively seek to integrate into the target language community [2]. These two types of motivation are not mutually exclusive but rather exist along a continuum, with learners possibly shifting from one to the other over time, depending on their experiences and exposure to the language.

Building on this foundational framework, more recent models have proposed a broader view of motivation. One such model suggests that motivation in second language learning is a dynamic system influenced by the learner's ideal self, their ought-to self (what they believe they should be), and their learning experiences. These factors interact and evolve over time, highlighting the importance of context and individual experiences in shaping motivation. The learning environment, cultural integration, and personal aspirations all play a significant role in this process, suggesting that motivation is not static but continually adapting to the learner's evolving perceptions and goals.

2.2. *Research Status of Motivation of International Students in China under the "Belt and Road"*

With the growing number of international students from countries along the "Belt and Road" coming to China, studies have explored the motivations driving their decision to study Chinese [3]. Early motivation is often centered on instrumental goals, such as pursuing degrees, gaining practical knowledge, and enhancing future career prospects. These goals are typically influenced by the desire to improve one's socio-economic status or to advance professionally in the global market. However, over time, as students engage with the local culture, interact with peers, and experience daily life in China, their motivations often evolve towards more integrative goals, such as developing an interest in Chinese culture and forming emotional ties with the language and the people [4].

Despite these valuable insights, much of the existing research tends to focus on large-scale surveys and questionnaires, which often overlook the nuances of individual experiences. These studies typically fail to track the evolution of motivation on a personal level or to consider the unique circumstances of international students in local universities. As a result, there is a gap in understanding how motivation develops over time and how it varies based on the students' individual backgrounds, experiences, and the educational context in which they are immersed.

2.3. Interactive Relationship between Cultural Identity and Learning Motivation

Cultural identity plays a pivotal role in shaping motivation for language learning, as it involves the emotional connection and sense of belonging that individuals feel toward the values, traditions, and norms of a particular culture [5]. This emotional bond not only fosters a deeper understanding of the language but also encourages students to embrace the culture and values associated with it. The process of cultural identity development is dynamic and influenced by various factors, including personal experiences, cultural exposure, and social interactions.

Research has shown that international students who actively participate in cultural practices—such as festivals, social events, and language exchanges—tend to develop a stronger sense of cultural identity. This, in turn, enhances their motivation to learn the language. The relationship between cultural identity and learning motivation forms a positive feedback loop: as students' cultural identity strengthens, their motivation to learn the language becomes more intrinsic and integrative, leading to even greater engagement in cultural activities. This cyclical process reinforces the connection between language learning and cultural integration, suggesting that fostering a sense of belonging can significantly enhance language acquisition and intercultural adaptation [6].

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Objects

This study focuses on eight international students from countries along the "Belt and Road," enrolled at Jilin Engineering Normal University during the academic years 2019-2021. The selected participants represent diverse cultural backgrounds, including one student from Bangladesh, two from Congo (Brazzaville), and five from Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Among the participants, two students are transitioning from junior college to undergraduate programs, expected to graduate in 2023, while six students are undergraduate students who are set to graduate in 2025 [7]. All participants have achieved a Chinese proficiency level of HSK Level 5 or higher and have been studying in China for 2 to 5 years.

The selection of these students provides a diverse cross-section of international learners, capturing various stages of academic progression and cultural integration. This diversity allows for a more comprehensive exploration of the changing motivations over time, as the students are exposed to different cultural experiences, academic challenges, and personal growth during their stay in China.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

The data for this study were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and text analysis, designed to provide a well-rounded understanding of the students' learning motivations.

Semi-structured Interviews: Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. The first round took place in September 2021, 1-3 years after the students' arrival in China, and the second round was held in June 2025, just before their graduation. These interviews covered key topics such as their initial reasons for learning Chinese, experiences with cultural activities, changes in motivation over time, and their future plans regarding staying in China [8]. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in probing deeper into individual experiences while maintaining consistency across all interviews.

Participatory Observation: As part of the data collection, the researcher participated in and observed several cultural activities that the international students engaged in. These activities included making zongzi (traditional Chinese rice dumplings) during the Dragon Boat Festival, crafting lanterns during the Mid-Autumn Festival, and participat-

ing in tea art experiences. These observations provided valuable insights into how students interacted with Chinese culture and how these interactions might influence their language learning motivation.

Text Analysis: In addition to interviews and observations, various written materials were collected from the students, including Chinese homework, reflections on cultural activities, and social media posts [8]. These texts were analyzed to identify expressions or references related to their motivation, cultural experiences, and attitudes toward learning Chinese. This multi-source data collection approach ensured a comprehensive view of the students' evolving motivations, incorporating both verbal and written forms of expression [9].

3.3. Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the study employed Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis method, a widely used approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The process involved the following steps:

Familiarization with the data: The researcher thoroughly reviewed the interview transcripts, observation notes, and text materials to gain a deep understanding of the data.

Initial coding: Key segments of the data were coded, with particular attention to the students' motivations, cultural interactions, and any shifts in their attitudes toward learning Chinese.

Searching for themes: The codes were then grouped into broader themes, focusing on significant factors influencing the evolution of motivation.

Reviewing themes: The themes were refined and reviewed to ensure they accurately reflected the data and captured the underlying patterns.

Defining and naming themes: The final themes were defined and clearly labeled to provide an insightful interpretation of the data.

Writing the report: The findings were organized into a comprehensive narrative, with connections made between the themes and the students' changing motivations.

Triangulation was employed to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. By combining data from multiple sources—interviews, observations, and written materials—the study aimed to provide a robust analysis of the students' evolving motivations and the factors influencing their cultural integration and language learning journey [10].

4. Research Results

4.1. Initial Motivation: Focusing on Instrumental Goals

The study revealed that the initial motivation for learning Chinese among international students was predominantly instrumental. For example, one student from Bangladesh shared that they chose to study in China because of the affordable tuition fees and the opportunities for future employment in Chinese-funded companies in Bangladesh. A student from Congo mentioned that achieving Chinese proficiency was a requirement for advancing from junior college to an undergraduate program, with HSK Level 3 being the admission threshold. For the five students from the Middle East, learning Chinese was seen as an additional career advantage, as they believed it would help facilitate business or technical cooperation between their home countries and China [11].

At this stage, their learning was largely focused on test-oriented tasks, such as mastering vocabulary and grammar. Their engagement with Chinese culture was minimal, often limited to basic facts, like knowing that dumplings are traditionally eaten during the Spring Festival. However, they showed little interest in exploring these cultural aspects in depth or developing a deeper understanding of them.

4.2. Motivation Evolution: Cultural Practice Promotes the Transformation from Instrumental to Integrative Motivation

As their time in China progressed, cultural practice activities played a crucial role in shifting their motivations from instrumental to integrative. This transformation occurred in three distinct stages:

Passive Participation Stage (within 1 year of admission): Early on, international students participated in cultural activities largely due to curriculum requirements or school-organized events, such as fire drills or opening ceremonies. Their involvement in activities like making zongzi during the Dragon Boat Festival or dumplings during the Chinese New Year was more out of curiosity and was not driven by a deep emotional connection to the culture.

Active Experience Stage (1-2 years after admission): As their Chinese language skills improved, the students began to engage more actively in cultural experiences, such as tea art and ceramic appreciation. One student noted that a lesson on the concept of "harmony without uniformity" in a tea art class helped them understand the importance of friendship in Chinese culture. Another student took the initiative to present a project in Chinese during a professional competition, expressing a desire to communicate ideas with Chinese classmates in their native language.

Emotional Internalization Stage (more than 2 years after admission): By this stage, cultural experiences had led to emotional identification with Chinese culture. International students began to consciously learn more about Chinese cultural practices and values. One student used the theme of "China-Africa Friendship on the Belt and Road" in a speech contest, quoting Confucius' famous saying, "Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you." All students became proficient in basic Chinese phrases like "Hello" and "Thank you," and some even adopted culturally significant expressions, such as "yuanfen" (fate) and "heqi shengcai" (harmony brings wealth).

4.3. Final State: A Stable Motivation System Driven by Cultural Identity

Interviews conducted before graduation revealed that all eight international students had developed a strong sense of cultural identity. This was reflected in several key behaviors:

Choice of staying in China for development: All students chose to remain in China after graduation. Three students pursued postgraduate studies, four joined Chinese-funded companies, and one started a cross-border trade company. One student from Bangladesh explained that they saw numerous opportunities for career development in China and appreciated the lifestyle there.

Willingness to spread culture: The students actively shared Chinese culture with their families and friends. For instance, one Saudi student posted about the customs of the Mid-Autumn Festival on social media, while a student from Congo helped translate cases related to China-Africa cooperation for the school.

Enhanced emotional belonging: The students expressed strong emotional ties to China, often stating that they felt "warm in China" and regarded the university as their second home. At their graduation ceremony, the students sang "Auld Lang Syne" in Chinese as a way to express their fondness and reluctance to leave.

5. Discussion

5.1. Driving Mechanism of Motivation Evolution

This study supports Dörnyei's dynamic motivation theory, which posits that learning experience is the central factor driving changes in motivation. The cultural practice activities organized by Jilin Engineering Normal University played a crucial role in providing international students with authentic, real-world language-use opportunities. These activities, such as tea art sessions and traditional cultural practices, allowed students to immerse themselves in Chinese culture through hands-on experiences, thereby reducing the

perceived cultural gap. The concept of "learning by doing" facilitated a deeper connection to both the language and the culture. Additionally, teacher-student interactions and peer support were significant catalysts in the evolution of motivation. For example, in tea art classes, teachers not only explained cultural symbols but also linked them to professional knowledge, helping students from fields like International Economy and Trade integrate their understanding of Chinese culture with their future career prospects. This dynamic interplay between experiential learning and social interactions reinforced the shift in their motivations from instrumental to integrative.

5.2. Particularity of International Students' Motivation in Local Colleges and Universities

International students in local colleges and universities, like those at Jilin Engineering Normal University, often have motivations that differ from their counterparts at centrally administered institutions. In particular, students in local universities tend to prioritize the practical benefits and adaptability of their studies. The initial motivations of these students are often driven by pragmatic factors such as the affordability of education ("low-cost study abroad") and the career prospects associated with learning Chinese, especially in the context of Chinese-funded enterprises or cross-border trade. However, despite these practical motivations, cultural activities tailored to the students' needs and academic backgrounds can facilitate a transformation toward a deeper cultural identity. This study shows that through well-designed cultural activities—particularly those that connect cultural practices to students' academic disciplines—local universities can enhance the motivation shift. By aligning cultural experiences with professional goals, students' initial focus on instrumental outcomes evolves into a more integrative and culturally enriched motivation, supporting their long-term engagement with both the language and the host culture.

5.3. Motivation Characteristics under the "Belt and Road" Background

The evolution of international students' motivation also highlights the interplay between policy, educational practice, and individual choice within the context of the "Belt and Road" initiative. The initiative, as a broad policy framework, offers strong institutional and governmental support for international students in China. It encourages them to view their time in China not just as an opportunity to improve their professional prospects but as a chance to engage deeply with Chinese culture and contribute to the broader goals of international collaboration and development. The university's training model acts as a bridge, transforming macro-level policies into tangible, personalized experiences for students. This educational model plays a vital role in shaping students' motivations, guiding them from an initial focus on "utilizing Chinese opportunities" to a more profound understanding of "integrating into Chinese development." As students experience and internalize Chinese culture, they begin to see their personal and professional growth as intertwined with the country's broader development trajectory, thus reinforcing their sense of belonging and long-term commitment.

6. Conclusions and Implications

6.1. Research Conclusions

The Chinese learning motivation of international students from "Belt and Road" countries at Jilin Engineering Normal University follows a dynamic trajectory of "instrumental motivation → cultural interest → cultural identity." Initially, their motivation is focused on achieving practical goals, such as acquiring academic qualifications and advancing their careers. Over time, cultural interest emerges through participation in cultural activities, and ultimately, a stable cultural identity is developed. This cultural identity is reflected in behaviors such as staying in China for career development and actively promoting Chinese culture. Key factors influencing this motivation shift include cultural

practice activities, the supportive language environment, and opportunities for personal development.

6.2. Practical Implications

Optimizing cultural activity design: Local universities should design cultural activities that align with the professional backgrounds of international students. For example, offering courses on "Cultural Differences in Business Etiquette" for students majoring in International Economy and Trade, or organizing "Chinese and Foreign Student Technical Salons" for students in computer science, can enhance the relevance of cultural learning and deepen students' engagement with Chinese culture.

Building a supportive learning environment: Universities should strengthen the intercultural teaching skills of Chinese language instructors and establish "Chinese and Foreign Student Mutual Assistance Groups." These initiatives can facilitate deeper cultural understanding and foster daily interactions that enrich students' learning experiences.

Improving the support system for development in China: Universities should connect international students with the talent needs of the "Belt and Road" initiative, providing career guidance, policy consultation, and other services. This will help transform students' cultural identity into long-term motivation for professional development in China.

6.3. Research Limitations and Prospects

This study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single university. Future research could expand the scope to compare the motivations of international students across different regions and universities. Additionally, longitudinal tracking methods could be employed to further explore the long-term effects of motivation evolution.

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