

**GENDER DIFFERENCES IN MOTIVATIONS FOR LEARNING  
CHINESE:  
A CASE STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN  
MALAYSIA**

Lee Hui Ling  
Universiti Malaysia Kelantan  
and Balazs Huszka  
Universiti Malaysia Pahang

**ABSTRACT**

*For the past few years, undoubtedly due to China's growing economic status, there has been a significant increase in the number of students learning Chinese. As a third language in university curricula in Malaysia, it also enjoys a popularity never seen previously. From the angle of didactics, therefore, it is indeed of particular importance to carry out a multi-perspective research on motivations of Malaysian learners behind choosing Chinese as a foreign language. Based upon our experience, there is a remarkable gender difference in this field. This study examined these differences in motivation for learning Chinese amongst undergraduate students in Malaysia. A representative sample of 75 participants was selected from elementary level Chinese classes at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. Findings of the investigation, based on a questionnaire, were analyzed by the software 'IBM SPSS Statistics'. The analysis of the data revealed that female participants look at the practicability of the language when learning Chinese, whereas male participants are motivated primarily by their social responsibility and the learning situation. An overall analysis of the variables showed that male participants received a higher mean value in 'learning situation' only, and female participants were rather dominant in respect of 'individual development', 'social responsibility', 'task value', 'information medium', 'self-efficacy' and 'intrinsic interest'. Through awareness of these gender-driven differences, both teaching and learning efforts can be optimized in the didactics of Chinese at universities in Malaysia.*

**Key words:** *gender differences in motivation · learning Chinese · undergraduate students*

## A. INTRODUCTION

**Problem Statement:** Undoubtedly, China's economic boom at present times has resulted in a growing interest in learning Chinese at universities around the world; yet, at least to our knowledge of the literature on the subject, little or no significant research has been carried out on the possible diversity of motivations in a Malaysian context. From our point of view, by narrowing the motivational range to China's rising material prosperity only and by making it the sole origin of teaching/learning the Chinese language, we might run the risk of overlooking the particular needs of our students. The reason is that some of them might be less determined to learn Chinese for profit-driven activities in the future, (fore)seeing the language solely as a means to build a linguistic-cultural bridge to Chinese-speaking business associates; but they might be intrigued by the target culture in general (literature, music, calligraphy etc.), or are just driven by friendship with a native speaker. At worst, the environment (be it the family or a particular institution of higher education) may compel the student to learn Chinese; in which case, he will not be able to forge positive emotional links with the language and will most likely fall short of external expectations. Against this background, a clear diversification of types of motivation has become inevitable to maximize Chinese teaching/learning efficiency at Malaysian universities.

As an initiation to more complex research on the topic, in this case study we attempt to characterize the distribution of preset

motivational types amongst undergraduate students who have chosen Chinese as third language at *Universiti Malaysia Kelantan*. Speaking from our own experience, there is a notable gender difference in the motivational backgrounds of students, on which the main focus will be placed here to get more sophisticated data. Basically, we would like to answer the following questions: (1) Is there any difference between the genders in motivation when learning Chinese? (2) If yes, then what characteristic motivational types do female and male undergraduate students own? Our conclusions will be based on the statistically evaluated outcomes of a complex questionnaire, and we believe that our findings can be the base for research larger in scale; thus, this short paper of ours could indirectly contribute to the further improvement of Chinese language didactics at universities in Malaysia.

**Theoretical Considerations:** The usage of the term *Chinese* might be deceptive, for it is oftentimes unclear which Chinese dialect (Mandarin, Wue, Yue, etc.) is meant by it. However, when learning Chinese as a foreign language, the target is the acquisition of the standardized form based, to put it simply, on the Beijing dialect (*Pǔtōnghuà*). For Malaysians of non-Chinese background, the major difficulties with learning Chinese are (1) the correct pronunciation of the four word-differentiating tones (Malay or Tamil are not tonal languages), since their inappropriate use can lead to serious misunderstandings (e.g. *mā* – 'mother', *má* – 'numb', *mǎ* – 'horse', *mà* – 'abuse'); and (2) the Chinese characters (*hànzì*). Regarding (1), we

can say that with continuous and intensive pronunciation drills and listening exercises, a considerable betterment can be achieved in short time; yet concerning (2), the lecturer should be aware of what exactly the students need the language for. For those who learn the language for the sole purpose of oral communication, it might not be essential to master the Chinese characters; the usage of *pīnyīn*, the official system for transliterating Chinese into Latin script with tonal marks may suffice. However, in this case an intriguing feature of the Chinese culture remains hidden to the students; in addition, later, should the case occur that these students would like to change the learning target to a more differentiated and balanced one, there will be a huge discrepancy between the development of speaking-listening and writing-reading skills.

There are numerous attempts in the specialist literature to classify different types of motivation. The very first studies on the topic (with a special attention to the process of second language acquisition) were those of Gardner and Lambert in the 1950s; however, their model of integrative and instrumental motivation (1972)<sup>1</sup> lacked psychological and contextual factors [1]. A decade later, the hitherto missing psychological outlook was presented by Deci and Ryan who discuss the intrinsic and extrinsic

motivation in their book (1985)<sup>2</sup>. During the 1990s and later years there was a clearly cognitive orientation in research and publication. *Per definitionem*, motivation is a state/condition that activates a goal-oriented behaviour based on needs and desires [2]. It is beyond doubt one of the primary determinants of learning outcomes in foreign language acquisition – be it the second (L2) or further ones (L3...X) [3, 4]; and, if being utilized properly, it can drive one to success in the target language.

As to Chinese as a foreign language, we can posit that some decades back it was merely a language for libertines travelling to Asia or for sinologists – for the first group, Chinese was important to communicate with locals; for the second, the language was a mean to access China's vast cultural heritage. For the time being, incentives to acquire Chinese are more variegated and people are learning the language irrespective of their age, educational or financial background. Chinese has come into vogue, according to the public opinion this is due to China's recent economic boom; however, this is an overgeneralization of the facts, and in reality there are many more factors contributing to the increasing popularity of the language. Certainly, no surveys are needed to know that the appearance of budget airlines to Asia; China's support for learners of Chinese (in terms of a standardized proficiency test called *Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì* or the Confucius

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<sup>1</sup> Gardner, R.C. & Lambert, W.E. (1972). *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.

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<sup>2</sup> Deci, E.L. & Ryan, R.M. (1985). *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-determination in Human Behavior*. New York: Plenum Publishing Co.

Institute, *Kǒngzǐ Xuéyuàn*, that promotes Chinese language and culture abroad etc.); the again flourishing fad of love for the exotic Asia in America and Europe; are also amongst the motivating factors. However, to facilitate the teaching of Chinese in particular countries, the exact identification of local motivations is irremissible. Despite its popularity at Malaysian universities no, or no resounding research, has been conducted amongst our students to ascertain, why they have chosen Chinese language from the range of elective courses, and what their motivations were. Therefore, our article aims to be a pioneering study in this field.

## B. METHOD

**Participants and Measuring Instrument:** A representative sample of 75 participants was selected from elementary level Chinese classes at *Universiti Malaysia Kelantan*. For certain reasons, unfortunately, solely 67 questionnaires were handed back to the researchers. The female-male distribution of this sample was 3.79:1, the Malay-Indian-others ethnic distribution was 3:1:0.69, and the majors' (business-others) distribution was 1.16:1. The participants were all 20-24 years old. The research was conducted at the very end of the semester. The students participated voluntarily and anonymously.

The measuring instrument was 'IBM SPSS Statistics', a software family which can accompany the entire chain of analytic procedures beginning from planning and data collection to application [5]. To execute our

analysis, we used version 16.0. By means of the well-known sample t-test, we calculated the differences of averages to perform a statistical analysis of the data. The Alpha coefficient of reliability was 0.875.

**Questionnaire:** The questionnaire was composed of 34 multiple-choice questions that were divided into two main sections. In the first section, the students were asked about their gender, age, ethnic background, and faculty. The second section of the questionnaire consisted of 30 questions on learning motivation types, where the possible answers were structured by the five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree ... 5=strongly agree). The questionnaire design was based on [6] and [7]. Furthermore, this second section contained seven variables, each with their own items. The variables and their items were as follows:

**1.Individual development:** Dependent on test scores. To obtain a university certificate. To find a lucrative employment in the future. To increase my competitive strength and social status. To find better education and employment opportunities abroad. To become an expatriate in Chinese-speaking countries. To travel abroad for the purpose of experiencing Chinese culture.

**2.Social responsibility:** To contribute to Malaysia's prosperity and harmony. To catch up on recent economic and technological developments. Because learning Chinese is a challenge for me. To live up to the expectations of my parents. In order to facilitate the learning of other academic subjects.

**3.Task value:** To be able to communicate with Chinese-speaking people. Because of a special interest in learning Chinese. Because I like this language. To acquire good Chinese skills is a stepping stone to one's success in life. Fluency in Chinese is a symbol of outstanding education.

**4.Learning situation:** Dependent on the quality of textbooks. Dependent on whether I liked my teacher or not. Dependent on teaching methods. Dependent on my results. Dependent on teaching materials.

**5.Information medium:** To understand local Chinese culture. To know more about China. To understand the history, culture and customs of China. Being interested in China-Malaysia relations.

**6.Self-efficacy:** I believe that I will excel in the Chinese class. I am

confident and I can master every topic in the Chinese class.

**7.Intrinsic interest:** Being interested in Chinese culture (calligraphy, lion dance, etc.). Being interested in Chinese movies or literature.

### C. RESULT

The results for gender differences indicate that significant differences exist between female and male participants in learning motivation types. Table 1 (s. below) shows that female participants have higher mean scores in six learning motivation types than their male counterparts ('M' stands for 'mean', 'SD' for 'standard deviation'):

TABLE 1  
Independent Sample t-test for the Items of Learning  
Motivation Types  
Higher Mean Scores (Female > Male)

Learning Motivation Types	Gender	M	SD
1. In order to facilitate the learning of other academic subjects	M	3.357	0.842
	F	4.151	0.718
2. To become an expatriate in Chinese-speaking countries	M	2.714	1.267
	F	3.283	1.116
3. Because I have a special interest in learning Chinese	M	2.875	0.949
	F	3.453	1.048
4. To acquire good Chinese skills is a stepping stone to one's success in life	M	3.571	0.646
	F	4.019	0.843
5. Because I like this language	M	3.857	0.770
	F	4.226	0.776
6. To be able to communicate with Chinese-speaking people	M	4.286	0.726
	F	4.604	0.531

It is apparent that four of these six items belong to the variable 'task value'; thus, we can assume that the female participants are

learning Chinese for practical purposes.

As shown in Table 2, male participants have higher mean scores in five learning motivation types

compared to their female counterparts:

**TABLE 2**  
Independent Sample *t*-test for the Items of Learning Motivation Types

Learning Motivation Types	Gender	M	SD
1.To contribute to Malaysia's prosperity and harmony	M	3.929	0.475
	F	3.604	0.927
2.Dependent on teaching methods	M	3.786	0.802
	F	3.491	0.993
3.To know more about China	M	2.929	0.917
	F	3.170	1.205
4.To live up to the expectations of my parents	M	3.786	0.893
	F	3.585	1.216
5.Dependent on whether I liked my teacher or not	M	3.286	0.611
	F	3.132	1.194

Male participants are apparently driven by social responsibility (item 1 and 3) and their learning situation (item 2 and 5); the role of information medium (item 3) is not significant. Table 3 indicates that statistically significant differences exist between

the two gender groups in all seven variables:

**TABLE 3**  
Independent Sample T-test for the Variables of Learning Motivation Types

Variables	Gender	M	SD
1.Individual development	M	3.551	0.648
	F	3.809	0.690
2.Social responsibility	M	3.729	0.356
	F	3.845	0.651
3.Task value	M	3.657	0.480
	F	4.060	0.553
4.Learning situation	M	3.500	0.406
	F	3.408	0.780
5.Information medium	M	3.339	0.625
	F	3.392	1.014
6.Self-efficacy	M	3.393	0.764
	F	3.557	0.745
7.Intrinsic interest	M	3.143	0.602
	F	3.415	0.964

In summary, we can say that female participants demonstrated a stronger individual development, social responsibility, task value, information medium, self-efficacy and intrinsic interest than male participants; whereas the latter group exhibited a greater preference for the learning situation.

On grounds of the results presented above, we can conclude that our presumption, i.e. that there are significant gender differences in learning Chinese, was verified (s. Question 1 in 1.). Generally speaking, female participants in our investigation look at the practicability of the language when learning Chinese, whereas male participants are motivated primarily by their social responsibility and the learning situation (s. Question 2 in 1.). A more detailed look at the data shows that female participants have higher mean values in six items of three variables ('task value', 'individual development' and 'social responsibility') (s. Table 1) and males have greater scores in five items of three variables ('social responsibility', 'learning situation' and 'information medium') (s. Table 2) (s. again Question 2 in 1.). Furthermore, in comparison to each other, an overall analysis of the variables reveals that male participants have received a higher mean value in 'learning situation' only (which is beyond doubt the primary motivation for them); female participants are rather dominant in respect to 'individual development', 'social responsibility', 'task value', 'information medium', 'self-efficacy and intrinsic interest'.

## D. DISCUSSION

The differences presented above, i.e. that female participants' motivation is basically the practical benefit from learning Chinese and males are driven by their social responsibility and the learning situation (which is the only factor where they have higher scores than females!), are palpably bred by social norms, gender role expectations and gender-age-mode of thought correlations. As this study of ours was carried out at one university (*Universiti Malaysia Kelantan*) only, we cannot take the risk of generalization for all universities in Malaysia – albeit the potential representability of data and conclusions. To draw conclusions of general validity, the research should be extended to other branches of study at universities in the whole of Malaysia, since it is very likely that an entrepreneur would have different motivations to learn a language than someone who is going to be a linguist or a dentist. Notwithstanding, we believe that the method outlined above could lead to country-specific results which might be the corner stone of a reorientation towards a greater efficiency in the didactics of Chinese language in Malaysia.

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***Sekilas tentang penulis*** : Lee Hui Ling, Lecturer / Chinese Language Coordinator, Chinese Language Unit, Third Languages Department, Center for Language Studies and Generic Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Dr. Balazs Huszka, Senior Lecturer, German Language Unit, Foreign Languages Department, Centre for Modern Languages and Human Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Pahang.