

## Beyond the L2 Motivational Self: The Chinese Heritage Self as a Framework for Understanding CHL Motivation

### Abstract

This qualitative study examines how Chinese heritage language (CHL) learners develop and sustain motivation across educational trajectories in diverse sociocultural contexts. Grounded in the L2 motivation self system (Dörnyei, 2009) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986), the study investigates the adequacy of prevailing L2 motivation frameworks, accounting for heritage-specific motivational processes. The study seeks to capture the core concepts of CHL motivation and associated identity and emotion experiences, with particular attention to motivational fluctuations across social and contextual conditions throughout learners' histories and spaces. Two broad research questions guided the study:

1. What do CHL learners perceive as meaningful and relevant in their CHL learning?
2. How do CHL learners sustain their motivation to continue learning despite contextual adversities?

The study was conducted at a U.S. university located in a metropolitan area with a large Chinatown. A 16-item questionnaire was administered to collect participants' background information. Seventeen students voluntarily participated in individual semi-structured interviews exploring language learning histories, identity development, emotional experiences, and sociocultural positioning. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes.

An inductive coding approach was employed. Following grounded analysis procedures, recurring concepts and salient themes were identified, with particular attention to lexical patterns associated with motivation, identity, and emotion, dimensions that have received little attention in prior CHL research. Through inductive thematic analysis informed by narrative inquiry, three overarching themes emerged, capturing the dynamic interplay among motivation, identity, and emotional experience in CHL learning. Each theme comprises a set of interrelated concepts, highlighting motivation and its links to identity and emotion development: 1. Motivational change and identity development; 2. Aspiration for CHL fluency and passion for understanding cultural heritage; 3. Positive experiences derived from social interactions sustain CHL motivation and support perseverance in learning.

A central construct, the *Chinese Heritage Self* emerged, comprising two interrelated dimensions (1) emotional bonds with family members that motivate learners to acquire CHL for communication and connection, and (2) appreciation of deeply rooted cultural values that foster a sense of heritage-based belonging. This construct elucidates motivational trajectories characterized by early demotivation in monolingual-oriented community schools and subsequent re-engagement in college or study-abroad contexts. In addition to heritage-based passion for CHL and culture, identity performance and positive learning experiences sustained motivation. Findings further indicate that social interaction, parental recognition, and authentic cultural participation function as salient motivational resources sustaining long-term goal pursuit and learning perseverance despite limited CHL input and social adversities. Throughout the process, learners deepened their Chinese Heritage Self, negotiated challenging environments, strengthened their beliefs, and derived enjoyment from achieving their goals and reconstructing their identities. Importantly, the study contributes to L2 motivation theory by demonstrating that CHL motivation involves the ongoing construction of a heritage-oriented self that extends beyond established L2 motivational constructs.