
From Cultural Curiosity to Career Goals: Motivations for Chinese Language Learning in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Vietnam's deepening integration into the global economy—marked by milestones such as the *Đổi Mới* reforms, accession to ASEAN and the WTO, and growing trade with China and Taiwan—has intensified demand for Chinese-speaking professionals. In this context, Chinese proficiency has emerged as valuable linguistic capital, shaping both employability and cultural engagement. This study examines the motivations driving Vietnamese university students in Ho Chi Minh City to pursue Chinese language studies, situating their learning within broader socio-economic and cultural dynamics. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and complemented by Dörnyei and Ottó's Process Model of L2 Motivation, the research adopts a qualitative approach. From June 2024 to July 2025, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 Chinese language majors (aged 19–21) from multiple universities. Findings reveal a multidimensional motivational structure combining intrinsic cultural interest—such as appreciation for Chinese art, history, cuisine, and heritage—with extrinsic career-oriented goals, including employment in foreign-invested enterprises and scholarship opportunities. Students demonstrating integrated regulation or intrinsic motivation sustained higher engagement through self-directed study, participation in Chinese clubs, and consistent practice. However, external constraints, notably part-time work and time limitations, often hindered learning intensity. The study underscores that the quality and self-determination of motivation are as critical as its presence. Effective educational strategies should integrate cultural enrichment, practical career pathways, and learner autonomy to foster sustained commitment and maximize language acquisition outcomes.

Keywords: Motivation, Chinese language, Vietnamese students, Self-determination theory, Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Taiwanese government began actively encouraging economic investment in Southeast Asian countries. This policy led to a significant wave of Taiwanese businesses establishing subsidiaries and factories throughout the region (Wang, 2001). Following the implementation of the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) policy in 1986, Vietnam began transitioning toward a market-oriented economy. This reform accelerated industrialization and enabled Vietnam's gradual integration into the global economy (Kokko, 1998). Vietnam normalized diplomatic relations with China in 1991. By the end of 1994, the United States lifted its long-standing economic embargo against Vietnam. Subsequently, Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995, the Asia-Pacific Economic

Cooperation (APEC) in 1998, and officially became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) on November 1, 2007.

These significant geopolitical developments catalyzed Vietnam's attractiveness to foreign investors. Among the leading countries investing in Vietnam are Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, with numerous companies establishing operations in manufacturing, electronics, services, and construction. Taiwan, in particular, has maintained a stable and expanding economic presence in Vietnam, contributing to increasing labor demands, especially for Chinese-speaking professionals in Taiwanese-owned enterprises. From 2015 onward, China rose to become the top trading partner for many countries in Southeast Asia. China's ambitious "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative (now known as the Belt and Road Initiative – BRI) has played a pivotal role in shaping regional infrastructure, economic dependency, and trade routes. As part of this strategy, China invested heavily in large-scale infrastructure projects, such as railways, ports, and industrial zones, thereby tightening its economic influence throughout the region (Callahan, 2016; Bharti & Kumari, 2024). Simultaneously, China's soft power has grown substantially. Through the global expansion of Chinese-language media—films, music, mobile applications like TikTok (Douyin in China), WeChat, and Weibo—China has extended its cultural influence. Institutions such as the Confucius Institutes, established across Southeast Asia, also serve as centers of Chinese language teaching and cultural dissemination (Kurlantzick, 2007; Hartig, 2015).

Amid this evolving regional dynamic, Taiwan launched its New Southbound Policy (NSP) in 2016. This policy aimed to strengthen economic and cultural exchanges between Taiwan and 18 countries in Southeast and South Asia, including Vietnam. The NSP signaled a strategic pivot away from excessive economic reliance on China, while simultaneously reinforcing Taiwan's soft power and people-to-people ties with ASEAN countries. In Vietnam, this policy has led to increased bilateral cooperation, student exchange programs, and greater mutual recognition between the two societies.

With intensified trade and investment flows between Vietnam and both Taiwan and China, the demand for Chinese-speaking human resources has risen significantly. Taiwanese and Chinese firms operating in Vietnam often seek employees who are proficient in Mandarin Chinese, not only for effective workplace communication but also to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and business efficiency. In this context, Chinese language skills are increasingly viewed as a form of linguistic capital—a valuable asset that enhances employability, income potential, and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1991; Park & Wee, 2012).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the learning of Chinese in Vietnam is not only influenced by pragmatic economic motivations but also shaped by broader geopolitical shifts and cultural flows. Vietnamese students pursuing Chinese language majors are situated within this complex interplay of local aspirations and regional power dynamics. To succeed in acquiring a

foreign language, several factors play essential roles, including learning styles, teacher effectiveness, and study intensity. However, motivation remains one of the most critical psychological determinants of language learning success (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Spolsky, 1989; Sulistiyarini & Sukardi, 2016). Motivation influences the amount of time and effort students invest, their resilience in the face of challenges, and their willingness to seek opportunities for practice and engagement.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the motivations driving Chinese language learning among Vietnamese university students majoring in Chinese language and culture in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The research also aims to identify the challenges students face, as well as the opportunities arising from the growing demand for Chinese proficiency in the labor market.

Theoretical Perspectives On Motivation

Motivation is the driving force that prompts individuals to act in order to satisfy their needs, fostering positive engagement and determining the direction of that engagement. There are various concepts and definitions of motivation in foreign language learning. Language learning motivation refers to the learner's attitude, desire, and effort when acquiring a foreign or second language. According to Gardner (1985), learning motivation consists of four main components: the goal, the individual's effort, the desire to achieve that goal, and the individual's attitude toward the learning activity. Corder (1967) asserted that with sufficient motivation, anyone can successfully learn a foreign language.

Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972) distinguished between two types of motivation in second language learning theory: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation refers to the learner's desire to acquire a language out of a wish to integrate and connect with the community of its speakers. This type of motivation emerges when learners seek to become attached to and immersed in the culture of the target language. Instrumental motivation, on the other hand, is driven by the learner's aim to achieve practical goals through language learning, such as securing employment, traveling, or passing examinations.

Ryan and Deci (1985) developed the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explain how motivation is formed, maintained, and enhanced in the context of language learning. According to SDT, motivation is classified into two main types: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity for the inherent pleasure, satisfaction, or interest derived from the activity itself. It is driven by internal factors and does not rely on external incentives or pressures. In contrast, extrinsic motivation involves performing a task in order to gain external rewards or to avoid negative consequences.

Furthermore, Ryan and Deci (2000) proposed that extrinsic motivation exists along a continuum of self-determination, consisting of four levels, ordered from least to most autonomous: External regulation – the least autonomous form, where behavior is controlled by

external demands or rewards, such as performing a task to receive a prize or avoid punishment; Introjected regulation – a partially internalized but still controlled form of motivation, where individuals act due to internal pressures, such as guilt, obligation, or the desire for approval or pride; Identified regulation – a more autonomous form, where individuals recognize and accept the value of the activity, choosing to engage in it voluntarily because they consider it important or beneficial;

Integrated regulation – the most autonomous type of extrinsic motivation, where behaviors are fully assimilated with one's self-concept and align with personal values and goals, even though the activity may still be instrumental in nature.

Ryan and Deci (2017) argue that intrinsic motivation represents a fundamental driving force in human learning across the lifespan, standing in contrast to learning and instruction imposed by external demands or mandates. Although autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation share with intrinsic motivation the quality of being highly self-determined, they differ in their underlying bases. Intrinsic motivation stems from genuine interest and enjoyment, whereby individuals engage in activities because they find them inherently stimulating or pleasurable. In contrast, identified and integrated regulations arise from a personally endorsed sense of value, in which learners view activities as important and worthwhile even if they are not inherently enjoyable (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Building on this framework, Taylor et al. (2014) underscore the pivotal role of intrinsic motivation in driving academic achievement, as it cultivates proactive, persistent, and creative engagement in learning. Learners who find their studies both enjoyable and personally meaningful are more likely to achieve superior academic outcomes. In a similar vein, Oga-Baldwin et al. (2017) provide compelling evidence for Self-Determination Theory, showing that higher levels of self-determination are strongly associated with improved learning performance. Their research with young Japanese language learners further demonstrates that fostering autonomy and engagement can substantially enhance both motivation and academic success. Complementing these findings, Wen (1997) reveals that intrinsic motivation is a key catalyst for initiating the study of Chinese. Specifically, the desire to explore and preserve one's cultural heritage, along with a deep appreciation for Chinese art and literature, serves as a powerful and enduring source of inspiration. Students motivated by such culture-oriented values not only achieve higher academic performance but also maintain long-term commitment to their language learning journey.

METHOD

The study is based on the Self-Determination Theory proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000). The objective of this study is to explore the motivations for learning Chinese among Vietnamese students currently enrolled in universities in Ho Chi Minh City. To achieve this aim, a qualitative

research approach was employed to collect and analyze data. The study was conducted from June 2024 to July 2025. In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with 29 students (18 female and 11 male) who were studying Chinese language at various universities. These students, aged between 19 and 21, had been learning Chinese for at least one year.

The interviews took place in informal settings, such as restaurants and coffee shops. Among the 29 participants, seven were interviewed via social media platforms such as Zalo and Facebook. The researcher used an encrypted notebook to record observations during each interview. Each session lasted between 50 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a relaxed and comfortable environment, encouraging participants to share their thoughts and experiences openly.

All interviews were audio-recorded—with participants' consent—to ensure accurate documentation of important details. These recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate data analysis and then translated into English. To protect participants' identities, all personal information was anonymized, and pseudonyms were used throughout the research process. Only the researcher had access to the original data to ensure confidentiality and uphold ethical integrity.

This study was conducted with a high degree of diligence and care throughout both the data collection and analysis stages. The use of semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to obtain rich, detailed narratives from participants. Furthermore, the processes of audio recording and verbatim transcription ensured that no important information was omitted or misinterpreted.

The researcher selected representative excerpts from participants' responses that corresponded to the main themes for presentation in the findings section. Each participant was assigned a unique code to distinguish their contributions in the results. These codes consisted of the prefix "SV" (representing "sinh viên" in Vietnamese, meaning "student") followed by a number from 1 to 29, corresponding to the order of participation. The coding system used in this study incorporated variables such as age, gender, reasons for choosing Chinese language studies, learning motivation, influencing factors, duration of study, and challenges in learning Chinese.

The researcher had over two years of experience teaching Chinese in Vietnam and had established relationships with several Vietnamese students at different universities. Through these connections, the researcher employed the snowball sampling method by asking participants to recommend additional interviewees. This method, combined with semi-structured interviews, facilitated the collection of in-depth and diverse data relevant to the research objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language as a Cultural Passport: Loving the Language, Embracing the Culture

Each student's decision to learn Chinese stems from their own circumstances, experiences, and personal goals, resulting in a diversity of learning motivations. For many, a

passion for Chinese culture serves as the strongest driving force. The appeal of the language lies not only in its unique writing system and rich tonal patterns, but also in the long-standing cultural values associated with it. Eight students reported being drawn to Chinese through emotionally expressive songs with profound lyrics, as well as captivating television dramas and films that vividly depict the everyday life, history, and people of China. Seven students stated that their decision to study Chinese was inspired by the vibrant traditional festivals, folk tales, and, in particular, the diverse culinary culture – from delicate dim sum and bubble tea to spicy Sichuan hotpot and distinctive street food. This love and curiosity for exploration became the key reason they chose to major in Chinese language, with the aspiration not only to master the language but also to gain a deeper understanding of the culture they cherish. They shared:

When I was a child, I often watched Chinese and Taiwanese martial arts films, and I was especially captivated by the classic series Journey to the West. The humanistic values embedded in the stories, along with their rich cultural and historical settings, left a profound impression on me. I believe that learning Chinese will enable me to explore more deeply the culture, history, and philosophical perspectives of the Chinese people. Therefore, I decided to major in Chinese Language to turn my childhood passion into a long-term and serious academic journey. (SV1, age 19, female, personal interview, July 2024)

I have traveled to both China and Taiwan. These trips allowed me to gain a deeper appreciation of the richness of the culture, the depth of the history, and the traditional values preserved through architecture, cuisine, and customs. In addition, I admire several well-known Chinese singers and actors. The combination of these firsthand experiences and my passion for the arts has become a powerful motivation, inspiring me to choose Chinese as my major. (SV5, age 20, female, personal interview, August 2024)

Five students of Chinese-Vietnamese descent shared that their connection to Chinese culture began in early childhood, nurtured by constant exposure to the traditions, flavors, sounds, and community life of the Chinese diaspora in Vietnam. They grew up in neighborhoods where traditional customs and festive celebrations such as the Lantern Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival were observed with great enthusiasm, often marked by colorful lantern displays, dragon dances, and the sharing of symbolic foods. Signature dishes like steamed buns, black sesame sweet soup, and dumplings were not only part of holiday feasts but also enjoyed in everyday family meals, creating a sense of comfort and continuity. In addition to food and festivals, they were surrounded by Chinese folk tales passed down through generations, melodious songs sung during family gatherings, and the natural use of the Chinese language in conversations at home. These experiences fostered a deep emotional bond with their cultural heritage and instilled pride in their identity. They expressed a shared aspiration to study Chinese in a systematic and formal way, with the goal of gaining greater insight into the history, literature, and philosophy of their

ancestors. By doing so, they hope to preserve their heritage in its most authentic form and ensure it can be passed on to future generations. One of them expressed:

I am of Chinese-Vietnamese descent and have been exposed to Chinese culture since childhood. I also learned a little Chinese during my early years, which inspired me to major in Chinese Language with the goal of becoming a Chinese teacher in the future, as well as contributing to the preservation and promotion of Chinese culture in Vietnam. (SV27, age 20, male, personal interview, March 2025)

In addition, several students shared that receiving scholarships from the university, along with the opportunity to participate in exchange programs in China or Taiwan, was an important factor influencing their decision to major in Chinese Language. These opportunities not only provide financial benefits but also offer the prospect of experiencing an international learning environment and directly engaging with the native language and culture. One student shared:

I received a scholarship from the university, which motivated me to choose this major. The more I study, the more I enjoy the language. I hope to earn another scholarship to join a student exchange program in China. (SV19, age 21, female, personal interview, March 2025)

From Classroom to Career: Chinese as a Strategic Gateway to Professional Opportunities

For some students, the decision to study Chinese is closely tied to their long-term career aspirations. Six students noted that, in the current context, Taiwanese and Chinese companies are investing heavily in various sectors in Vietnam, ranging from industrial manufacturing and international trade to services and technology. The growing presence of these enterprises has significantly increased the demand for a workforce proficient in Chinese, particularly in positions related to trade negotiations, project management, tourism and hospitality, translation and interpretation, as well as the coordination of cultural exchange and cooperation programs.

These students recognize that mastering Chinese not only enables them to meet the recruitment requirements of foreign-invested enterprises but also opens up opportunities for career advancement and professional growth in multicultural work environments. They believe that, in the era of globalization and deepening economic integration, alongside English, Chinese proficiency will become a crucial competitive advantage—helping them build international professional networks, access information and resources directly from the Chinese and Taiwanese markets, and expand their ability to work in other countries across the region. They shared:

Due to the United States–China trade war, more and more Chinese and Taiwanese companies have been opening factories and offices in Vietnam. If I can speak their language, I will have more opportunities to work with them and advance in my career. (SV26, age 20, female, personal interview, May 2025)

I have a strong passion for working as an interpreter and tour guide. At present, an increasing number of Chinese and Taiwanese enterprises are investing in Vietnam, creating a high demand for professionals proficient in Chinese. In addition, economic and cultural exchanges between the Vietnamese and Chinese people are growing rapidly, opening up many promising career opportunities. These factors have motivated me to study Chinese, with the aspiration of pursuing my professional passion while also contributing to cultural connections and strengthening cooperation between the two countries. (SV17, age 20, male, personal interview, November 2024)

In addition, some students shared that their decision to study Chinese was partly influenced by their university entrance exam results. Specifically, their scores were only sufficient to enroll in the university's Chinese Language Department.

From Decision to Mastery: Key Factors Shaping Chinese Language Learning

Students' decisions to study Chinese are not solely driven by initial choices based on personal interests or circumstances, but are further shaped and reinforced through ongoing learning and real-life experiences. A range of factors influence this journey, including a passion for the Chinese language and culture, career aspirations, opportunities for scholarships and international exchange, family cultural background, and university admission circumstances. What may begin as a tentative decision often evolves into a dedicated pursuit of the language, with students aiming not only to acquire linguistic proficiency but also to develop a deeper understanding of the cultural, social, and economic contexts associated with it.

Based on Gardner's socio-educational model, foreign language learning motivation is shaped and sustained by four key components: (1) learning goals, (2) personal effort, (3) the desire to achieve objectives, and (4) attitudes toward learning. Findings from surveys and interviews with Chinese Language majors in Vietnam reveal that these four elements not only exist as independent constructs but also interact closely, forming a multidimensional motivational system. For instance, a student with clearly defined learning goals is more likely to maintain consistent personal effort, thereby reinforcing the desire to attain objectives and fostering a more positive attitude toward the learning process. Moreover, these components are influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include personal interests, learning strategies, and self-efficacy beliefs, while external factors involve career opportunities, social environment,

and institutional or teacher support. The harmonious interplay between these two groups of factors not only helps sustain long-term motivation but also enhances the effectiveness of language acquisition—particularly in the context of learning Chinese in Vietnam, where the process is shaped by labor market demands and the broader trend of international integration.

Anchored in Aspiration: The Power of Goal Orientation

First, career aspirations emerged as the most frequently mentioned factor in the interviews, clearly reflecting the students' pragmatic orientation in learning Chinese. Many participants noted that, in the context of global economic integration and the expansion of investment from companies based in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, mastering Chinese is not merely a linguistic skill but also a “ticket” to access attractive job opportunities, particularly in fields such as trade, import–export, tourism, and media. Some students expressed a desire to take on roles that require bilingual or multilingual communication, thereby enhancing their personal competitiveness in the labor market. In addition to domestic career goals, studying abroad was also highlighted as a significant source of motivation. Seven students stated that achieving an excellent level of Chinese proficiency would enable them to secure full or partial scholarships at universities in China or Taiwan. For them, this is not only an opportunity to access advanced education but also a stepping stone to expand their international networks, accumulate academic and cultural experiences, and ultimately support their long-term professional development. They explained:

Right now, a lot of companies from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are investing in Vietnam. From what I've seen, there's a shortage of people who are really good at Chinese. So, if I can use both Chinese and English well, I think my chances of getting a good job will be much higher, and the salary will be better too. That's why I've set a goal to take the HSK exam next year. (SV13, age 20, female, personal interview, September 2024)

Right now, China and Taiwan are offering a lot of scholarships for Vietnamese students. My goal is to continue my studies and get a master's and then a PhD abroad. That's my biggest motivation to keep improving my Chinese and English skills. (SV28, age 21, male, personal interview, June 2025)

Second, many students choose to learn Chinese out of a deep appreciation for various aspects of Chinese culture, ranging from history and art to music, cinema, and literature. Some students shared that they were first exposed to Chinese culture through historical dramas, television programs, or classic literary works. In addition, learning

Chinese is also viewed as a journey of personal development. By studying the language, students simultaneously gain insights into Chinese philosophies of life, customs, and distinctive value systems. This process not only broadens their knowledge but also enhances their intercultural communication skills, fostering open-mindedness and adaptability in a globalized world. Thus, a passion for culture serves not only as the initial spark that inspires students to learn Chinese but also as a long-term source of motivation, encouraging them to remain committed and invest seriously in developing their language skills. One student shared:

I started watching Chinese martial arts films when I was in high school, and I was captivated by the humanistic values reflected in the stories. That made me want to explore Chinese culture more deeply, so I decided to study Chinese seriously. (SV8, age 19, female, personal interview, November 2024)

Investing Self, Investing Time: The Unseen Work Behind Language Mastery

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the interviews is the substantial personal investment—both in terms of effort and time—that students commit to their Chinese language learning journey. While motivation and goal orientation set the direction, it is the sustained and disciplined application of personal resources that determines progress and eventual success. For many participants, learning Chinese is not merely a classroom activity; it is a long-term commitment requiring daily practice, strategic planning, and consistent self-discipline. Students emphasized that their learning does not end when they leave the lecture hall. Many reported engaging in self-directed learning activities, such as reviewing vocabulary lists, practicing writing Chinese characters, and watching Chinese-language media to improve listening comprehension. Several participants mentioned the need to go beyond the prescribed curriculum, seeking additional materials—ranging from grammar reference books to mobile applications—that better suited their individual learning styles. They explained:

The writing systems of Vietnamese and Chinese are very different. Vietnamese uses the Latin alphabet, while Chinese is logographic. If I don't review and practice writing every day, it's very easy to forget Chinese characters. On weekends, I usually spend extra time practicing writing and studying vocabulary so that I can write the strokes more accurately. (SV6, age 19, female, personal interview, August 2024)

Outside of class hours, I usually spend 1–2 hours each evening studying Chinese on my own. I watch TikTok videos made by Chinese creators, listen to Chinese podcasts for about 30 minutes, and also take part in the Chinese club at my university. (SV24, age 20, female, personal interview, February 2025)

However, the findings also reveal that some students have to work part-time while studying to cover their living and educational expenses. Dividing their time between work and other academic subjects makes it difficult for them to maintain a consistent Chinese learning schedule. They admitted that after long working hours, they often feel tired and find it hard to concentrate on their studies. This not only affects the pace of their knowledge acquisition but also reduces their motivation to learn Chinese, especially for those who already have to make significant efforts to balance multiple responsibilities at the same time. One student shared:

I have to both study and work, so the time I can devote to learning is quite limited. There are times when I'm so tired that I can't make it to class, and as a result, my academic performance isn't as good as I would like it to be. (SV22, age 20, male, personal interview, February 2025)

Research findings from the present study indicate that motivation is a core psychological determinant of success or failure in learning Chinese among Vietnamese university students. This conclusion aligns with decades of research in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), which emphasizes that, alongside cognitive ability, learning styles, and teaching quality, motivation functions as the “engine” that transforms potential into actual achievement (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Spolsky, 1989). Without sustained motivation, even learners with strong abilities may struggle to attain their desired proficiency levels.

In this study, students' motivation exhibited a multidimensional character, combining both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. On one hand, many participants were driven by a profound passion for Chinese culture — including literature, cinema, festivals, and cuisine — reflecting intrinsic motivation, defined as engaging in an activity for the inherent enjoyment and satisfaction it brings (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). On the other hand, motivations related to career aspirations, scholarship opportunities, and the growing economic presence of Chinese and Taiwanese enterprises in Vietnam illustrated extrinsic motivation, particularly in its more self-determined forms such as identified regulation and integrated regulation.

The interplay between cultural passion and internalized external goals created a robust motivational foundation. This dual force not only provided students with a clear sense of direction but also sustained their commitment in the face of challenges such as heavy workloads, limited study time, or the complexity of the Chinese writing system.

From a comparative perspective, the present findings resonate with prior studies in both Vietnamese and international contexts. For example, Son (2021), in a survey of Vietnamese students studying Korean at the University of Foreign Language Studies – University of Danang, found that reading motivation ranked in descending order as: Importance > Extrinsic Value > Intrinsic Value > Reading Efficacy. High-achieving students displayed stronger motivation across most dimensions, except for “Importance,” and were more proactive in seeking out learning materials beyond the classroom. This aligns with our finding that students with clear career goals or cultural interests tend to maintain high levels of autonomy and persistence. Similarly, Wen (1997) reported that a deep appreciation for traditional culture and a desire to explore artistic heritage serve as enduring sources of intrinsic motivation for Chinese language learners — a pattern strongly reflected among the participants in our study.

At the international level, Lamb (2012) demonstrated that career aspirations are a key driver of foreign language learning motivation among Indonesian adolescents in the context of regional integration. This parallels our findings, where many students viewed Chinese proficiency as a competitive advantage in a labor market increasingly shaped by Chinese and Taiwanese enterprises. Likewise, Chen, Warden, and Chang (2005) found that combining intrinsic motivation with highly self-determined forms of extrinsic motivation (identified and integrated regulation) sustains long-term learning engagement and performance — further supporting the application of the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in our study.

The Self-Determination Theory proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000) offers a useful analytical lens for interpreting these findings. According to SDT, optimal learning motivation depends on satisfying three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. In this research, autonomy was reflected in students’ ability to organize their own study schedules — for example, dedicating one to two hours each evening to reviewing vocabulary, listening to Chinese podcasts, or engaging with native-speaker content on TikTok. Competence was enhanced through sustained practice, such as weekend sessions devoted to improving the accuracy of Chinese character writing and mastering stroke order. The resulting sense of accomplishment reinforced continued effort. Relatedness emerged through participation in Chinese clubs, exchange programs, and peer study groups, which provided emotional support, cultural exchange opportunities, and shared learning objectives — factors shown to enhance motivation (Oga-Baldwin et al., 2017).

Students exhibiting high levels of integrated regulation — viewing Chinese not merely as a skill but as part of their personal identity and professional development — tended to maintain long-term effort. This supports SDT’s assertion that self-determined forms of extrinsic motivation can be as effective as intrinsic motivation in sustaining achievement (Deci & Ryan, 2017).

While SDT explains the quality of motivation, the Process Model of L2 Motivation by Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) provides insights into its temporal dynamics, consisting of three key phases:

Preactional Stage (Goal Setting and Initiation) – This is when learners establish objectives and commit to them. In the present study, many students began with well-defined goals, ranging from instrumental objectives (e.g., employment in Chinese/Taiwanese companies) to integrative aims (e.g., deeper engagement with Chinese culture). Concrete examples included preparing for the HSK examination within a year or securing a study-abroad scholarship. Consistent with Ushioda (2011), goal clarity at this stage increased the likelihood of sustaining long-term effort.

Actional Stage (Sustaining and Regulating Motivation) – Here, learners must maintain their motivation through attention control, effort regulation, and emotional management. Participants reported various self-regulation strategies, such as fixed daily study hours, incorporating multimedia resources (e.g., TikTok videos, Chinese podcasts) to combine learning with entertainment, and participating in language clubs to maintain social engagement. Nevertheless, motivation decline was observed, particularly among students balancing part-time work and academic commitments, leading to fatigue and reduced focus. This supports Dörnyei's view that situational control and external support are essential for maintaining momentum; without them, even strong initial motivation can wane.

Postactional Stage (Reflection and Future Planning) – In this phase, learners evaluate their progress. Positive self-assessment — such as noticeable improvement in writing accuracy, listening comprehension, or test scores — reinforced ongoing engagement. Conversely, perceived stagnation often led to reduced effort and diminished commitment. This underscores the value of structured reflection tools, such as learning journals, peer feedback, and periodic goal reviews, to help learners recognize progress and re-enter the preactional stage with renewed determination.

Overall, the findings underscore that motivation in learning Chinese among Vietnamese students is a dynamic, multi-layered construct influenced by both internal passions and external opportunities. Effective pedagogical and institutional strategies should aim to simultaneously foster intrinsic cultural engagement and support the internalization of extrinsic goals, thereby enhancing both the quality and sustainability of motivation.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the motivations driving Vietnamese university students to learn Chinese and the factors that either sustain or hinder their learning progress. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and supported by complementary frameworks such as Dörnyei and Ottó's Process Model of L2 Motivation, the findings highlight a dynamic interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic influences. These

motivations are shaped by students' personal aspirations as well as the socio-economic forces accompanying Vietnam's integration into the global economy.

The success of Chinese language acquisition among Vietnamese students depends not merely on the presence of motivation, but on its quality, depth of self-determination, and continuous reinforcement. Both intrinsic enjoyment and the internalization of external goals require systematic support through effective educational practices, adequate institutional resources, and well-developed personal learning strategies.

The journey toward Chinese language mastery is neither linear nor uniform. It is molded by a unique combination of personal passion, cultural engagement, and pragmatic career ambitions, all situated within the broader context of Vietnam's socio-economic transformation. The most impactful motivation-enhancing strategies are those that recognize this diversity—integrating flexibility, cultural enrichment, and practical relevance in a balanced and sustainable way.

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