

The Influence of Family Environment, Learning Values, and Self-Expectations on Late Adolescents' Motivation to Learn Chinese

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Abstract

In the context of globalization and the increasing role of Chinese as an international language, it has become important to understand what motivates adolescents to learn Chinese. Motivation is widely regarded as a key psychological factor influencing students' learning behavior and achievement. Drawing on expectancy–value theory, this study explores how family environment, learning values, and self-expectations shape the motivation of late adolescents to study Chinese. Data were collected from 355 students at Guizhou Industrial Vocational and Technical College, all of whom were in late adolescence or early adulthood. The findings show that family support, recognition of the value of Chinese learning, and students' confidence in their own abilities all contribute positively to learning motivation. Among these, learning values and self-expectations play a stronger role than family environment, suggesting that students are most motivated when they see Chinese as useful for their future and believe in their ability to succeed. In contrast, demographic factors such as gender, only-child status, and family structure had little effect. The study confirms the relevance of expectancy–value theory to Chinese language learning and highlights the importance of fostering value recognition and self-confidence, alongside supportive roles for families, schools, and policymakers.

Keywords: family environment, learning values, self-expectations, learning motivation, expectancy–value theory

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Introduction

Motivation has long been recognized as a central concept in educational psychology, as it strongly influences the time, effort, and persistence students devote to learning tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In second language acquisition, motivation is especially important because it affects not only students' achievement but also their long-term commitment to language learning (Gardner, 1985). With the growing global significance of China, learning Chinese has become an academic and professional priority for many students worldwide.

However, students' motivation to learn Chinese is far from uniform. While some demonstrate strong enthusiasm and perseverance, others struggle to sustain their learning even when they understand its potential benefits. To better explain these differences, this study examines three key factors: family environment, learning values, and self-expectations. Previous research suggests that family support and communication play an important role in shaping students' attitudes and confidence (Zhao, 2020). Learning values, such as the usefulness of Chinese and personal interest in it, form an essential psychological basis for motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Self-expectations, closely tied to self-efficacy, determine whether students believe they can succeed and are therefore willing to make an effort (Bandura, 1997).

These factors can be better understood through the lens of expectancy–value theory, which has become one of the most influential frameworks for studying student motivation. The theory proposes that achievement-related behaviors are primarily determined by two elements: individuals' expectations for success and the value they attach to the task (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Expectancy beliefs reflect students' confidence in their ability to succeed, while task values include perceived usefulness, personal importance, and intrinsic interest. Together, these dimensions shape the choices students make, the effort they invest, and their persistence in learning.

Building on this framework, the present study examines how family environment, learning values, and self-expectations interact to influence late adolescents' motivation to learn Chinese. Motivation in this context is viewed as the combined outcome of external support from the family and internal factors such as value recognition and self-confidence.

Methodology

Participants and Data Collection

A total of 415 questionnaires were distributed at Guizhou Industrial Vocational and Technical College. After excluding incomplete or invalid responses, 355 valid questionnaires were retained, resulting in an effective response rate of 85.5%. The participants were late adolescents and young adults, ranging in age from 17 to 22 years.

Instruments

To measure these constructs, students responded to items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). All scales had previously undergone reliability and validity testing, ensuring their appropriateness for use in the present study.

The Family Environment scale consisted of 12 items that assessed parental support, the quality of parent–child communication, and the overall learning atmosphere at home. The items reflected the degree of encouragement and guidance students received from their families, as well as whether the home environment was conducive to effective learning.

The Learning Values scale included 10 items measuring students' perceptions of the utility value of Chinese for academic and career development, together with their intrinsic interest in learning the language. These items captured both the extent to which students regarded Chinese as beneficial for their future goals and the enjoyment or satisfaction they experienced in studying it.

The Self-Expectations scale comprised 11 items that focused on students' beliefs about their own abilities, including confidence in learning Chinese, self-efficacy in managing learning tasks, and aspirations for achievement. These items reflected the degree to which students expected themselves to succeed and their willingness to set and pursue learning goals.

Finally, the Learning Motivation scale consisted of 11 items that measured students' motivational tendencies, including persistence in learning, initiative in taking responsibility for their progress, clarity of goals, and curiosity about the language. The items provided insights into how motivation was expressed through students' attitudes and behaviors toward learning Chinese.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a statistical program. Reliability testing indicated that the Cronbach's α values of the subscales ranged from 0.69 to 0.83, demonstrating acceptable to good internal consistency. To address the research objectives, descriptive statistics were first employed to summarize the data, followed by correlation analyses to examine the relationships among the key variables. Multiple regression analyses were then conducted to further determine the predictive power of these variables in explaining the outcomes of interest.

Results

Correlation Analysis

Family environment, learning values, and self-expectations were all positively correlated with motivation to learn Chinese ($r = 0.788, 0.787, 0.792$, respectively; $p < 0.001$). This demonstrates that higher family support, stronger recognition of learning values, and greater self-expectations are each associated with higher motivation.

Regression results indicated that all three predictors significantly influenced motivation, but learning values ($\beta = 0.335, p < 0.001$) and self-expectations ($\beta = 0.291, p < 0.001$) exerted stronger effects than family environment ($\beta = 0.316, p < 0.001$). The overall model explained 46% of the variance in learning motivation ($R^2 = 0.46$).

Figure 1

A Part Model of the Influence of Family Environment, Learning Value, and Self-Expectations on Chinese Learning Motivation

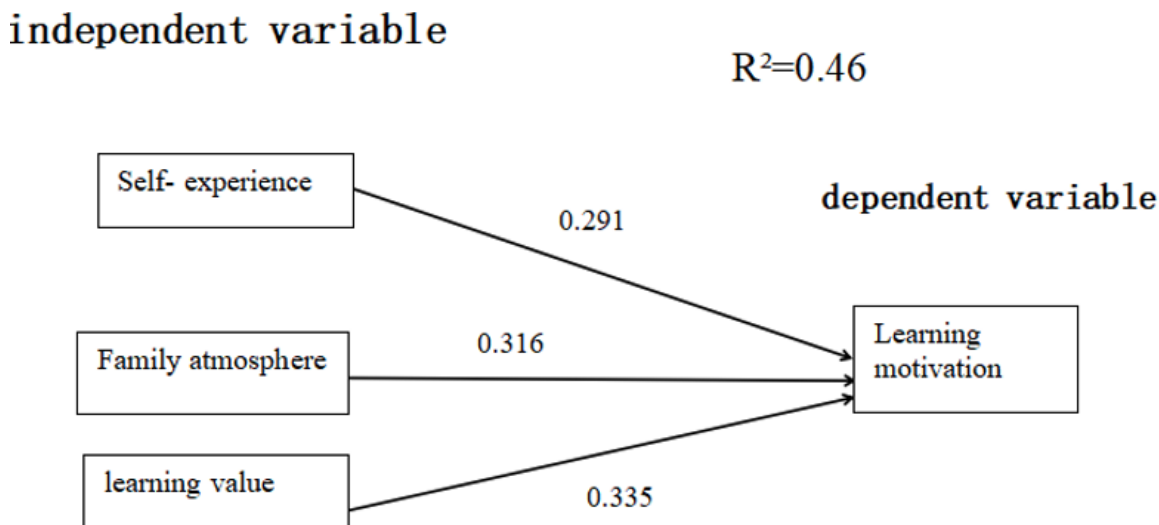


Table 1

Pearson Correlation Matrix of the Four Variables (n = 350)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Family Environment	1	0.788***	0.70***	0.72***
2. Learning Values	0.787***	1	0.74***	1
3. Self-Expectations	0.792***	0.74***	1	0.74***
4. Learning Motivation	0.72***	1	0.74***	1

Regression Analysis

The regression analysis revealed that all three predictors—family environment, learning values, and self-expectations—had a statistically significant positive influence on learning motivation. Among these, learning values ($\beta = 0.335, p < .001$) and self-expectations ($\beta = 0.291, p < .001$) emerged as relatively stronger predictors when compared to family environment ($\beta = 0.316, p < .001$), indicating that students’ perceptions of the usefulness and enjoyment of learning Chinese, as well as their confidence and aspirations, were more influential in shaping their motivation than the home environment. The overall model accounted for 46% of the variance in learning motivation ($R^2 = 0.46$), suggesting a substantial explanatory power and highlighting the importance of both individual beliefs and values in driving students’ motivation to learn Chinese.

Demographic Variables

Independent sample t-tests and ANOVA showed that gender ($t = -0.80, p = 0.426$), only-child status ($t = -1.67, p = 0.097$), and family structure ($t = 0.60, p = 0.548$) did not produce significant differences. This suggests that learning motivation is shaped more by psychological than demographic factors.

Discussion

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings are consistent with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which emphasizes the critical roles of intrinsic interest and perceived competence in sustaining motivation. The relatively stronger influence of learning values underscores the dual importance of intrinsic enjoyment and the recognition of the utility of Chinese for academic and career advancement in maintaining student engagement. Similarly, the significant role of self-expectations reflects the impact of self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997), indicating that students who perceive themselves as capable and who hold high aspirations are more likely to invest effort and persist in learning tasks.

Although the family environment was also a significant predictor, its comparatively weaker effect suggests that parental support and communication provide an important foundation, yet motivation in language learning is primarily driven by students' internalized values and self-beliefs. This finding highlights the need for educational interventions that extend beyond parental involvement to explicitly cultivate intrinsic interest, utility perceptions, and self-confidence in learners. In this respect, the results also confirm the central proposition of expectancy–value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002): students' motivation is shaped predominantly by their perceptions of the value of learning and by their confidence in their ability to succeed.

The alignment of these results with existing scholarship further strengthens their significance. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) have emphasized that when students perceive a task as valuable, they are more willing to expend effort, while Bandura (1997) argued that self-efficacy is fundamental for sustaining motivation. In the present study, both learning values and self-expectations were shown to outweigh the influence of family environment in the specific context of Chinese language learning. Moreover, the absence of significant effects from demographic variables challenges common assumptions in educational research, suggesting that differences in motivation are not primarily attributable to gender or family structure but are largely driven by individual psychological mechanisms.

Conclusion

Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study can be articulated in several key aspects. First, this research simultaneously examined the effects of family environment, learning values, and self-expectations within a single comprehensive framework, thereby extending the analytical scope of existing studies on learning motivation. Previous research has often emphasized one factor in isolation, such as the influence of family background or the role of individual self-efficacy. By integrating these three dimensions into one model, the present study demonstrates that each exerts a significant positive influence on learning motivation. This highlights that learning motivation is shaped not by a single determinant but through the combined influence of multiple factors operating across different levels. Second, the findings provide new empirical evidence for the applicability of expectancy–value theory in the context of Chinese language learning. According to this framework, motivation is shaped by students' valuation of a learning task and their expectation of success. The results of this study support this theoretical assumption, showing that students' motivation to learn Chinese is primarily driven by internal psychological mechanisms, while family support plays a supplementary role. Thus, the findings not only confirm the validity of expectancy–value

theory but also extend its application to the specific domain of Chinese language learning, reinforcing its cross-cultural relevance. Third, the study refines the understanding of demographic variables in the context of learning motivation. Educational research has often assumed that gender, only-child status, or family structure exert significant effects on motivation. However, this study found no such influence, suggesting that motivational differences are more strongly explained by psychological factors—such as value recognition and self-efficacy—than by demographic or social categories. This highlights the primacy of psychological mechanisms over background characteristics in shaping motivation, thereby contributing to a more nuanced theoretical understanding. Finally, the methodological design of this study also advances theoretical discourse. By employing a combination of reliability testing, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression, the research ensured both scientific rigor and interpretive clarity. This multi-method approach serves as a model for future investigations into learning motivation, particularly in educational psychology and second language acquisition.

In summary, the theoretical contributions of this study lie in four areas: (1) expanding the analytical perspective by integrating multiple variables into a comprehensive framework; (2) providing strong empirical evidence for the expectancy–value theory in Chinese learning contexts; (3) clarifying the limited influence of demographic variables; and (4) demonstrating methodological rigor. Collectively, these contributions deepen the theoretical understanding of how learning motivation is formed and provide a solid foundation for subsequent research.

Practical Contributions

Beyond theoretical implications, this study also carries significant practical value. The results demonstrate that family environment, learning values, and self-expectations all exert important influences on adolescents' motivation to learn Chinese, and these findings can be directly applied to educational practice. *First*, in terms of family education, the findings suggest that the way parents support and communicate with their children directly shapes students' willingness to learn. A warm, supportive, and encouraging family atmosphere enhances motivation, whereas excessive pressure or punitive approaches may undermine it. Therefore, parents are encouraged to participate actively in learning activities, set realistic goals with their children, and provide constructive feedback, rather than focusing solely on criticism. *Second*, at the school level, learning values emerged as the most powerful driver of motivation. This highlights the importance of helping students recognize both the practical and intrinsic value of learning Chinese. Teachers should emphasize the relevance of Chinese for academic advancement and future career opportunities, while also fostering intrinsic interest through engaging activities such as cultural festivals, debates, or speech contests. By combining an emphasis on “usefulness” with opportunities for genuine enjoyment, schools can strengthen both the instrumental and intrinsic dimensions of student motivation. *Third*, at the individual level, self-expectations also play a critical role. Whether students believe they can succeed directly influences their motivation and persistence. In practice, this means that teachers and parents should support students in setting manageable goals, provide timely encouragement, and build confidence through small but continuous achievements. Positive peer influence can also be harnessed, as observing the success of classmates often strengthens students' own confidence and willingness to learn.

Finally, at a broader policy level, the findings point to the importance of collaboration between families, schools, and society. Educational authorities can design training programs for parents to enhance supportive educational practices, schools can integrate real-life

applications of Chinese into their curricula, and communities can provide cultural resources and extracurricular opportunities that enrich language learning. Sustainable improvement in motivation will require such multi-level cooperation across sectors. In summary, the practical contributions of this study lie in offering concrete directions: families should create supportive home learning environments, schools should strengthen value-oriented guidance, individuals should build self-confidence and persistence, and policymakers should foster collaboration across multiple levels. Taken together, these measures provide a comprehensive strategy for enhancing adolescents' motivation to learn Chinese.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers important theoretical and practical contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or students' subjective interpretations of the items. Although reliability and validity testing were conducted, self-report data cannot fully capture the complexity of learning motivation and related factors. Second, the cross-sectional design of the research limits the ability to establish causal relationships among family environment, learning values, self-expectations, and learning motivation. The observed associations demonstrate predictive power but cannot confirm long-term effects or developmental changes over time. Third, the sample was drawn from a specific context of adolescents learning Chinese, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Cultural, linguistic, and educational differences in other populations could lead to different motivational dynamics. Future studies should include more diverse samples to strengthen external validity. Fourth, while the study examined key predictors of learning motivation, other potentially relevant factors—such as teacher support, classroom climate, or peer relationships—were not included in the model. Incorporating these variables in future research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of motivational influences. Finally, the study employed quantitative methods exclusively, which limited the depth of insight into students' personal experiences and perspectives. Complementary qualitative approaches, such as interviews or focus groups, could provide richer detail and contextual understanding of how family environment, values, and self-expectations shape motivation.

Future Research Directions

Building on the limitations of this study, several directions for future research are recommended.

First, future studies could adopt a longitudinal design to track changes in family environment, learning values, self-expectations, and motivation over time. This would allow researchers to better understand causal relationships and the developmental trajectories of motivation in language learning.

Second, expanding the sample to include students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds would strengthen the generalizability of the findings. Comparative studies across different regions or countries could also reveal how cultural values shape motivational processes in language learning.

Third, future research should incorporate additional variables that may influence learning motivation, such as teacher support, classroom climate, peer interactions, or the use of digital learning tools. Including these factors would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the multi-level influences on motivation.

Fourth, employing mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative surveys with qualitative techniques, such as interviews, focus groups, or classroom observations, could yield richer insights. Such approaches would allow researchers to capture the nuanced experiences and perspectives of students that are not easily conveyed through questionnaires alone.

Finally, intervention-based research could be conducted to test strategies aimed at enhancing family support, fostering positive learning values, and strengthening students' self-expectations. By evaluating the effectiveness of such programs, researchers could provide practical recommendations for educators, parents, and policymakers.

In summary, future research should aim to extend the scope of investigation by incorporating longitudinal, cross-cultural, multi-variable, and mixed-method approaches, as well as testing practical interventions. These directions will deepen our understanding of the mechanisms underlying learning motivation and provide stronger evidence for effective educational practices.

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