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INTERCONNECTED FACTORS SHAPING CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW WITH INSIGHTS FROM NIGERIA

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Abstract

Foreign language learning is a complex process shaped by multiple interconnected factors spanning cognitive, social, affective, and individual-difference domains. This paper provides a systematic review of five core influencing factors—attitudes, motivation, learning environment, peer influence, and gender—that have been extensively examined in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Drawing on foundational theoretical frameworks and contemporary empirical studies, the review traces the conceptual evolution of each factor, synthesises key findings across diverse learning contexts, and identifies persistent gaps in the literature. Particular attention is paid to the attitudinal and motivational dimensions of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) learning, given the growing global prominence of Chinese Language Education. The paper argues that these five factors operate not in isolation but through complex interactions that vary across learner populations, instructional settings, and target languages. The review concludes with methodological implications for future research and practical recommendations for language educators, particularly those working with adolescent learners in under-researched contexts such as sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: language attitudes, learning motivation, learning environment, peer influence, gender differences, foreign language learning, Chinese as a foreign language

Introduction

The study of factors influencing foreign language learning has occupied a central position in applied linguistics for over half a century. Since the emergence of second language acquisition (SLA) as a distinct field of inquiry in the 1970s, researchers have sought to understand why some learners achieve higher levels of proficiency than others under ostensibly similar learning conditions (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2005). Early research focused primarily on cognitive abilities and instructional methods, but subsequent decades witnessed a gradual expansion toward affective, social, and contextual variable. (Leaver, Ehrman, & Shekhtman, 2005; Karaman, 2012).

This broadening of perspective reflects a growing recognition that language learning is fundamentally different from learning other academic subjects. Unlike mathematics or history, language learning requires learners not only to acquire new knowledge but also to adapt to—and in many cases, accept—a new culture, new communicative norms, and new ways of conceptualising the world (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). This inherently social and psychological dimension makes the study of learner attitudes, motivations, and environmental influences particularly salient.

This work reviews five core factors that have emerged as consistently significant in the SLA literature: attitudes toward the target language and its speakers, learning motivation (both integrative and instrumental), the learning environment (encompassing both macro-social and micro-classroom dimensions), peer influence (particularly salient during adolescence), and gender differences. While each factor has generated substantial independent research, the review emphasises their interconnectedness and the need for integrated analytical frameworks.

Nigeria-China Cooperation and the Integration of Chinese as a Foreign Language

Chinese language education in Nigeria began in informal, trade-driven forms. Prior to the establishment of formal instructional frameworks such as Confucius Institutes, initial Nigerian exposure to

Chinese came primarily through commercial interactions between Nigerian and Chinese traders in major commercial cities including Lagos, Onitsha, Aba, and Kano (Odinye, 2015; Abugu, 2024). This phase exhibited distinctly functional and transactional characteristics, with learning centred on practical scenarios involving pricing, quantities, logistics, and bargaining, lacking systematic grammar training, literacy development, or standardised pedagogy. Learning relied primarily on imitation and repetition, often producing hybrid Chinese expressions influenced by local languages and English. Despite institutional deficits, these informal contacts established sociolinguistic and psychological foundations for Nigerians' familiarity with Chinese and recognition of its economic and strategic value, setting the stage for subsequent formal Chinese education.

The formal commencement of Chinese language education is closely tied to the establishment of the Confucius Institute in Nigeria. Confucius Institutes, funded by the Chinese government in partnership with overseas universities, pursue core objectives including Chinese language teaching, Chinese cultural promotion, and academic, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges between China and host countries (Odinye, 2015; Yang, 2010). In 2008, Nigeria's first Confucius Institute was established, marking the transition from scattered informal contacts to institutionalised Chinese language education. This turning point provided formal platforms for curriculum development, teacher training, and academic research, introducing standardised teaching materials, professionally trained teachers, and internationally recognised proficiency assessment systems such as the HSK; it also created opportunities for Nigerian teachers and students to visit China and obtain scholarships (Odinye, 2017).

A pivotal policy breakthrough occurred in secondary education. Following a comprehensive curriculum review at both basic and senior secondary levels, the Nigerian federal government, through the National Education Research and Development Council (NERDC) and the Federal Ministry of Education, confirmed that from the 2025/2026 academic year, Chinese will be offered alongside French

and Arabic as an elective international language subject at the senior secondary level (NERDC, 2025; FME, 2025). Policy documents further indicate that Chinese will eventually be included as a subject in the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (NERDC, 2025; Lagos Echo News, 2025). However, despite policy approval, implementation progress across states and schools varies considerably; persistent systemic challenges—shortages of qualified Chinese teachers, limited teaching materials, and inadequate infrastructure—continue to impede the translation of policy intent into classroom practice.

The trajectory of Nigerian Chinese language education—from informal trade-driven language contact through institutionalised higher education programs centred on Confucius Institutes, to extension into the national secondary curriculum and examination system—reflects both deepening Nigeria-China cooperation in economic, diplomatic, and educational domains and the critical role of Nigerian scholars and educational institutions in language policy implementation. Thereby creating a natural experiment for studying attitude development over time. Longitudinal studies tracking learners from the point of first exposure through several years of instruction provide valuable insights into attitude formation and change.

Language Attitudes: Conceptual Foundations

Defining Attitude

Attitude constitutes one of the most extensively discussed constructs in foreign language learning research. The concept was systematically defined by Allport (1935), who characterised attitude as:

"a mental and neural state of readiness, organised through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related." (p. 810)

Allport's definition established two subsequently recurring points: first, attitudes always refer to specific objects (i.e., they are directed toward something); second, attitudes cannot be directly observed but must be inferred from external verbal behaviour, actions, and responses. This inferential quality has important methodological

implications, as it requires researchers to develop indirect measurement tools such as questionnaires, interviews, and observational protocols.

From a social-psychological perspective, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) defined attitude as "a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object" (p. 6). This definition provided operational foundations for later researchers to quantify attitudes using Likert-scale instruments and other psychometric approaches. The notion that attitudes are "learned" rather than innate implies that they are amenable to change through experience and intervention—an important consideration for language educators seeking to foster positive attitudes among learners.

A Tripartite Framework

Stern (1983, as cited in Rahman, 2005) proposed a tripartite framework that remains widely employed in language attitude research. Stern distinguished among:

a. Attitudes toward the target language community and its speakers—including perceptions of the culture, values, and social practices associated with the language;
b. Attitudes toward learning the language itself—including perceptions of the language's difficulty, usefulness, and aesthetic qualities; and
c. Attitudes toward language and language learning generally—including broader beliefs about multilingualism, the value of learning additional languages, and one's own linguistic identity.

This framework offers operational guidance for questionnaire design and attitude differentiation. For researchers studying Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), it suggests the need to measure learners' attitudes toward Chinese culture and speakers, attitudes toward the Chinese language as a learning task, and general orientations toward language learning separately. However, these three dimensions may not always align: a learner might hold positive attitudes toward Chinese culture while finding the language itself difficult and frustrating.

Attitude as a Component of Motivation

Gardner (1985), within his socio-educational model, positioned attitude as a core component of learning motivation. He distinguished between two attitudinal orientations: integrativeness, which refers to openness to the target language community and willingness to interact with its speakers; and attitudes toward the learning situation, which refers to learners' subjective evaluations of teachers, courses, and materials. Gardner's model was ground-breaking in recognising that attitudes are not merely incidental accompaniments to learning but active, causally significant factors that shape learners' engagement and persistence.

However, Baker (1992) offered a methodological caution: while attitudes and motivation are frequently used interchangeably in the literature, few researchers clarify their overlap and distinctions. Seki (2004) went further, arguing that the boundary between attitude and motivation is not clearly delineated—learners' motivation to learn a language is itself shaped by their attitudes and willingness to learn. This observation suggests that attitudes may be both a cause and a consequence of motivation, and researchers should be cautious about treating them as distinct, unidirectional variables.

Extension to Chinese as a Foreign Language

The attitudinal framework has been extensively extended to CFL research. Studies have examined attitudes toward Chinese characters (Okeke, 2020), attitudes toward Chinese culture and speakers (Odinye, 2019), and the relationship between attitudes and learning outcomes (Gong et al., 2018, 2020). A consistent finding across studies is that positive attitudes correlate with greater persistence and higher achievement, though the strength of this relationship varies across contexts and learner populations (Chan et al., 2022). This literature suggests that the attitudinal dimension merits careful attention in contexts where Chinese is newly introduced, such as Nigerian secondary schools, where learners have limited prior exposure to Chinese culture or speakers.

Learning Motivation: Integrative and Instrumental Orientations

The Gardner-Lambert Legacy

The systematic study of motivation in foreign language learning began with Gardner and Lambert's (1972) influential research, which identified a fundamental difference between language learning and other academic subjects: language learning requires learners to adapt to—and even accept—a new culture. They distinguished two motivational orientations:

Integrative motivation—where learners genuinely desire to learn a language to integrate into and become part of the target language community. Integrative motivated learners are interested in the culture, values, and people associated with the language, and they learn the language as a means of social connection and identity expansion.
Instrumental motivation—where learners are driven by practical goals such as passing examinations, securing employment, or advancing their careers. Instrumentally motivated learners view the language primarily as a tool for achieving external rewards.

Gardner and Lambert's (1972) conclude that integrative motivation tends to produce more solid and enduring language competence than instrumental motivation. This has been debated and refined in subsequent research. Studies in contexts where English is learned as a global lingua franca, for example, have found instrumental motivation to be equally effective (Dörnyei, 2005). In CFL contexts, research consistently finds instrumental motivation to be predominant, particularly in settings where Chinese is associated with economic opportunities (Odinye, 2015; Shandy, Charles, & Romy, 2025).

Gardner's Socio-Educational Model

Gardner (1985) further specified that learning motivation comprises multiple interconnected components, with attitude as one element alongside willingness to learn and effort expended. His socio-educational model posits that motivation is not a unitary construct but a composite of: Attitudinal orientations (integrativeness and attitudes toward the learning situation); Motivational intensity (the effort

learners invest in language learning); and Desire to learn (the learner's expressed wish to acquire the language).

The model has been criticised for its Western-centric assumptions and its limited applicability to contexts where integrative motivation is not salient (Dörnyei, 2005). Nonetheless, it remains the most extensively validated theoretical framework in the research on language learning motivation.

Motivation and Anxiety

In recent years, research has examined the relationship between motivation and other affective factors, particularly language anxiety. Studies have differentiated anxiety by skill domain: Zhao et al. (2013) and Zhou (2017) examined reading anxiety; Xiao and Wong (2014) addressed writing anxiety; and Luo (2014b) focused on speaking anxiety. Consistent findings indicate negative correlations between anxiety and language achievement, though correlation strength varies with learning context and learner population.

The mechanism linking anxiety and motivation appears to be bidirectional: learners who experience anxiety are less motivated to participate in classroom activities, which in turn reduces their learning opportunities and reinforces their anxiety (King & Mackey, 2007). This vicious cycle is particularly significant for adolescent learners, who may be especially sensitive to peer evaluation and pressure to perform in class.

CFL Motivation Research

In Chinese learning motivation research, Li (2013) surveyed Chinese teaching in four British primary schools, identifying motivation as one of four core factors affecting children's learning. Ruan et al. (2015) found that motivating learning tasks enhance enjoyment, foster autonomy, strengthen self-efficacy, and promote collaborative learning among Chinese language learners.

Gong et al. (2018, 2020), reviewing 175 CFL studies from 2004 to 2016, found that self-rated language proficiency strongly correlates

with actual achievement, while cultural identity constitutes the most central motivational source for heritage Chinese learners. Zheng and Richard (2021) extended research from the United States and China to Thailand, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, investigating online Chinese learners' motivation, anxiety, and learning strategies.

Most recently, Zheng (2023) found that for both heritage and non-heritage Chinese learners, positive attitudes and learning experiences substantially enhance motivation, while tasks combining challenge, interest, and personal meaning most effectively engage learners. This finding underscores the importance of instructional design in fostering motivation: learners are most engaged when they perceive the learning task as both meaningful and appropriately challenging.

Learning Environment: Social and Classroom Dimensions

Social Context

The learning environment is an important external factor shaping learner attitudes and motivation. Genesee (1983), from a social-contextual perspective, argued that foreign language attitudes are shaped by learners' overall social environment, encompassing practical utility needs, career aspirations, cultural belonging, and religious motivations. According to Genesee, attitudes are not fixed internal traits but products of social context—they emerge from learners' interactions with their social world and their perceptions of the language's relevance to their lives.

This perspective is particularly relevant to CFL learning in African contexts. In Nigeria, for example, Chinese language learning is closely tied to trade relationships, economic opportunities, and China-Africa diplomatic ties (Odinye, 2015; Abugu, 2024). Learners' attitudes toward Chinese are thus shaped not only by their classroom experiences but also by their perceptions of China's global role and the economic benefits of proficiency in Chinese.

Classroom Environment

Gardner (1985) complemented Genesee's macro-social perspective with the classroom-level dimension of "attitudes toward the

learning situation"—learners' subjective evaluations of teachers, courses, and materials. He argued that most learners encounter foreign languages in formal classroom settingsthat classroom-formed and classroom-based evaluations profoundly influence overall language learning attitudes. Thus, the learning environment encompasses both macro-social (Genesee's perspective) and micro-classroom (Gardner's perspective) dimensions.

Classroom affective climate constitutes a critical part of the learning environment. Dörnyei (2005) noted that learners typically experience a "silent period" when beginning oral practice. If learners remain in prolonged classroom anxiety without supportive teaching strategies to alleviate it, they tend to develop increasingly negative language attitudes. King and Mackey (2007) confirmed that anxiety not only impairs learning outcomes but directly transforms learners' attitudes.

These findings have practical implications for Chinese language teachers in contexts such as Nigerian secondary schools, where Chinese is newly introduced. Teachers must be trained not only in content knowledge but also in classroom management strategies that reduce anxiety, create psychological safety, and foster positive attitudes toward the language.

Learning Channels: Formal and Informal

Chinese learners may acquire the language through formal channels—Confucius Institutes, secondary schools, universities—or through informal means such as social media, music, podcasts, films, and foreign-language reading materials. These varied institutions and platforms offer distinct characteristics and trade-offs, with the learning environments they create differentially affecting learner attitudes and achievement.

Formal channels provide structure, qualified instructors, and systematic progression, but may lack authenticity and cultural immersion. Informal channels offer exposure to authentic language use and cultural content, but may lack instructional scaffolding and

feedback mechanisms. Research suggests that learners who combine formal and informal channels tend to develop more positive attitudes and higher proficiency (Chan et al., 2022).

Peer Influence: Social Dynamics in Adolescent Learning

Provide a preamble here

Peers as a Socialising Force

Peers are a significant social factor influencing language-learning attitudes during adolescence. Getie (2020) found that peer influence cannot be neglected: whether learners are accepted by their peer group often correlates with shared values. If peers do not value a language, individual learners are more likely to develop negative attitudes toward it.

Bartram (2006), in a comparative study, found that peer attitudes directly affect individual learners: fear of making pronunciation errors or being ridiculed in front of peers discourages active practice, and such peer pressure may exacerbate learning anxiety and generate negative language attitudes. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in classroom settings where learners are required to speak aloud or demonstrate skills publicly.

Near-Peer Effects

Pham (2016), investigating sociocultural factors in high school English learning motivation, identified "near-peer effects"—mutual influence among learners of similar age and proficiency levels—alongside parental encouragement and perceived personal value as crucial motivational factors. Near-peer effects operate through several mechanisms: learners observe peers' successes and failures, adopt peer norms, and seek peer validation through their performance.

These findings indicate that peers are not merely social actors outside the classroom but significant forces shaping language attitudes—particularly relevant for studying adolescent populations where peer relationships are especially salient. In contexts where Chinese is newly introduced in secondary schools, peer influence may accelerate or

inhibit the development of positive attitudes toward Chinese, depending on whether the peer group values Chinese proficiency.

Gender Differences in Language Learning Attitudes

Gender has been repeatedly shown to influence attitudes toward foreign languages. Luo and Limpapath (2016), surveying Grades 10–12 students at a private high school in Bangkok, Thailand, examined the effects of gender and program on Chinese learning attitudes. With 212 valid questionnaires (reliability $\alpha = 0.83$), they found a significant gender effect: female students generally held more positive attitudes toward learning Chinese than male students. Additionally, students majoring in Chinese demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes than those minoring in Chinese, as well as English and mathematics majors.

Similar gender differences have been found in other language learning contexts. A study of Turkish university students' motivation for learning Chinese found higher overall motivation among female learners. These findings suggest that gender is a non-negligible grouping variable when designing Chinese attitude studies targeting secondary school students.

The consistent finding that female learners hold more positive language attitudes than male learners has been attributed to several factors: differences in self-concept and confidence, socialisation patterns that encourage girls to develop communicative skills, and gender differences in learning strategies and preferences (Luo & Limpapath, 2016). This is evident in the larger number of females learning Chinese in comparison to males.

For language educators, these findings suggest that instructional strategies may need to be differentiated by gender, particularly in contexts where male learners show lower engagement or more negative attitudes. However, researchers should avoid essentializing gender differences: within-group variation may be as large as between-group differences, and gender interacts with other factors such as cultural background, socioeconomic status, and institutional context.

An Integrated Model of Factor Interactions

The preceding sections have examined five factors—attitudes, motivation, learning environment, peer influence, and gender—in relative isolation. However, as argued in the introduction, these factors do not operate independently but through dynamic, bidirectional interactions. This section proposes an integrated conceptual model to illuminate these interconnections, with particular attention to how they may manifest in Nigerian CFL learning contexts.

Attitudes and Motivation: Attitudes toward Chinese culture, speakers, and the language itself shape both integrative and instrumental motivation. Conversely, as learners experience success or failure in language learning, their motivation levels feedback to reshape attitudes—a bidirectional relationship that Seki (2004) cautioned researchers to acknowledge. In Nigeria, where instrumental motivation may predominate, positive attitudes may develop as a consequence of perceived economic utility rather than preceding it.

Motivation and Learning Environment: Highly motivated learners may actively seek out enriching learning environments (e.g., joining Chinese clubs, accessing online resources), while supportive learning environments enhance motivation by reducing anxiety and providing scaffolding. In resource-constrained Nigerian schools, teacher enthusiasm and pedagogical creativity may compensate for material deficits, sustaining motivation despite infrastructural challenges.

Learning Environment and Peer Influence: Classroom climate shapes peer norms—collaborative, low-anxiety classrooms foster positive peer attitudes toward language learning, while competitive, high-pressure environments may amplify peer ridicule and anxiety. In Nigerian secondary schools, where class sizes may be large, teachers can strategically structure peer interactions (e.g., through group work, peer tutoring) to harness near-peer effects positively.

Peer Influence and Gender: Peer groups often exhibit gendered norms around language learning, with female peer groups potentially reinforcing positive attitudes toward language learning, while male peer

groups may devalue it. However, as Chinese becomes associated with economic opportunity in Nigeria, male peer norms may shift, particularly in communities with visible China-Nigeria business ties.

Gender as a Moderating Variable: Gender does not operate as a standalone factor; rather, it moderates the relationships above. For example, the effect of peer influence on attitudes may be stronger for girls (who may be more sensitive to social approval), while the effect of instrumental motivation may be stronger for boys (if they perceive clearer economic pathways). These are hypotheses requiring empirical validation in Nigerian contexts.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

This work posits that language educators should employ several practical strategies. First, instructional design should balance challenge and support: tasks that are too easy bore learners, while tasks that are too difficult create anxiety. Tasks that combine challenge, interest, and personal meaning are most likely to enhance motivation (Zheng, 2023). Second, teachers should attend to classroom climate, reducing anxiety through supportive feedback, error tolerance, and opportunities for low-stakes practice. Third, peer influence should be harnessed positively through collaborative learning activities and peer mentoring.

For policymakers, the findings suggest that introducing a new language into the curriculum requires attention not only to teacher training and materials but also to the broader social and motivational context. Specifically, for Nigerian CFL implementation, it should:

1. investment in teacher professional development to address not only Chinese proficiency but also affective pedagogy, classroom management, and anxiety reduction strategies.
2. Develop partnerships with Chinese businesses operating in Nigeria to create internship, mentorship, and career-pathway opportunities that reinforce instrumental motivation.

3. Support the development of locally relevant teaching materials that connect Chinese learning to Nigerian cultural and economic contexts, rather than relying exclusively on imported textbooks.
4. Facilitate internet access and digital resource availability to expand informal learning channels for students in under-resourced schools.

Learners' attitudes are shaped by their perceptions of the language's utility, their cultural openness, and their peer environment. Public awareness campaigns, cultural exchange opportunities, and connections to career pathways may complement classroom instruction in fostering positive attitudes.

Conclusion

This review has examined five factors influencing foreign language learning: attitudes, motivation, learning environment, peer influence, and gender. Several conclusions emerge from the synthesis of this literature.

First, these factors do not operate in isolation but through complex interactions. Attitudes shape motivation; motivation affects engagement with the learning environment; peers influence attitudes; and gender moderates these relationships. Researchers studying any single factor should attend to its interconnections with others.

Second, the relative importance of these factors varies across contexts. In contexts where a language has clear economic value (as Chinese increasingly does in Africa), instrumental motivation may be as powerful as integrative motivation. In contexts where a language is associated with a prestigious culture or identity, integrative motivation may predominate. Researchers should avoid importing assumptions from one context to another without empirical validation.

Third, the learning environment—both social and classroom—emerges as a critical moderating factor. Supportive classroom climates that reduce anxiety and create psychological safety are essential for fostering positive attitudes and robust motivation. Teacher training and professional development should attend not only to content and pedagogy but also to classroom management and emotional support.

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