



Motivations for Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language: A Case Study in Belgium

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The purpose of this study was to understand and investigate the motivations for and reasons why students decide to study Chinese as their fourth foreign language in the European Union, using Belgium as a case study. Based on the social cognitive career and motivation theory, the study was guided by the research question: Why did the participants decide to study Chinese as a fourth foreign language in a Chinese language school in Belgium? In line with the case study approach, 16 participants were invited to share their ideas. Focus group activities, remarkable item sharing, and member-checking interviews were used to collect useful data. Three themes were categorised, including 1) it is enough for European languages, 2) career development and 3) friendship, networks, and education. More importantly, many participants indicated that the Chinese language offers business and career opportunities for young European people to excel in their skills in the Asian region. The outcomes from adult learners may fill the research and practice gaps for adult education and foreign language teaching and learning for adult learners in the European environment.

Keywords: Belgium, Chinese as a foreign language, Chinese learner, Chinese learning, foreign language learning, social cognitive career and motivation theory

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The learning of foreign languages is a popular avenue for personal and professional development. Although professionals may be skilled in many areas, communication with people from other countries depends on foreign language skills and cultural knowledge. Over the past century, English has been a popular foreign language in traditional school and adult learning environments internationally. Recent statistics from the Eurostat (*Foreign Language Learning Statistics, 2021*) show that in 2019, nearly all (99%) primary school students were required to learn English as a foreign language in Cyprus, Malta, Spain, and Austria. Furthermore, 96% of secondary school students in the European Union are required to learn English as their foreign language. Although a third language is not required by the government, more than 60% of students in the

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European Union learn more than two foreign languages in the traditional school environment (Modiano, 2017).

Currently, there are 24 official languages in the European Union, including Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish and Swedish. All these languages have the same official and legal status at the government level. The European Union encourages a policy of multilingualism, which is deemed important to 1) communicate with its citizens in their own language, 2) protect Europe's rich linguistic diversity, and 3) promote language learning (Iskra, 2022).

Many Member States continue to select English as an important foreign language for students to learn to a good standard in the traditional school environment (Modiano, 2017). However, there are exceptions in some of the Member States which have more than one official language. For example, in Belgium, Dutch, French, and German all have the same official status, and Belgian students are therefore required to aim to master all the official languages so they can communicate with citizens across their country. In the Iberian Peninsula, Catalan, Galician, and Basque also important languages in addition to Spanish. Therefore, foreign language teaching and learning is an important element of school curricula and instruction in the European Union (*Foreign Language Learning Statistics*, 2021).

Although the English language plays a significant role in many European Union Member States, not all citizens in the European Union can speak English perfectly. According to Modiano (2017), only 38% of European Union citizens learn English as their second and additional language. In addition, due to Brexit (Duda-Mikulín, 2019; Mccrory & Thomson, 2019; Modiano, 2017), a number of European Union citizens decided to go back to the European Union for personal development. Although English is still considered one of the official languages in the European Union, as Ireland and Malta continue to use English as their official and governmental language, the role of English is unforeseen, particularly in the European Union.

As an alternative other than the English language, some European students and language learners decide to study and select one or more non-European languages, which can also play significant roles in the international arena (Dos Santos, 2018). Some previous studies (Farley et al., 2020; Johnson, 2009; Morbiato et al., 2020; H. Wang, 2011) indicated that due to globalisation, Chinese business development, and international business trading, the Chinese language had become one of the popular languages in the business arena. For example, Johnson (2009) indicated that due to the massive population in China, the business market and consumers of Chinese customers should not be ignored. If business professionals and workers want to enter the Chinese market, Chinese language proficiency should be gained. In other words, foreign language beyond English is one of the latest trends in the educational system, particularly in the European Union after Brexit.

According to recent statistics from the Schola Europaea (2019), support from the Chinese government-sponsored Confucius Institute (HANBAN) has enabled a large

number of Chinese language schools to be established, which offer low-cost Chinese language and culture courses to students in European schools (*Chinese Language and Culture in the European Schools: Board of Governors in the European Schools*, 2019). As a result, Chinese language schools and classes have grown rapidly over the past decade: in 2010, there were 53 schools and classes in Europe, whilst in 2020, there were 67 (Textor, 2021). It is likely that the number of schools and classes will continue to grow due to the growing interest and enrolment of learners across Europe.

Significance of the Study

European students often learn at least one foreign language during their teenage years at the secondary school level. As English is usually their second foreign language, following government recommendation (Modiano, 2017), it is important to understand and investigate the motivations for and reasons why students in Belgium select their fourth foreign language.

Many recent studies (Alhamami, 2018; Gok et al., 2021; Peeters, 2018) have focused on teaching and learning approaches, learning instruction, computer-aided teaching and learning tools, curriculum development, and material-oriented studies. Only a few have focused on students' motivations and reasons for selecting their fourth foreign language at school, particularly where they have chosen Chinese (Dos Santos, 2018). Therefore, the results of this study will fill a gap in research and practice, potentially allowing school leaders and policymakers to invest in and enable Chinese as foreign language courses and resources for their students.

Since a large number of studies have focused on the learning motivations for traditional-age students who are enrolled at the secondary school and university level (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Fang, 2018), it is important to develop understanding of challenges in the adult learning arena. Therefore, this study addresses the research question by focusing on adult learners, and the results will contribute to filling the research and practice gaps for adult education and foreign language teaching and learning in Europe.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to understand and investigate the motivations for and reasons why students decide to study Chinese as their fourth foreign language in the European Union, using Belgium as a case study. The study applied the social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021a, 2021d, 2021e) to respond to the following research question: Why did the participants decide to study Chinese as a fourth foreign language in a Chinese language school in Belgium?

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Social Cognitive Career and Motivation Theory

The social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021a, 2021d, 2021e) aims to understand the motivations and decision-making processes of individuals and groups. Based on the developments of the social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989a, 1991), the social cognitive career

and motivation theory indicated that internal factors and external influences could change and manage people's ideas and thinking, particularly in the motivations and decision-making processes.

First, the social cognitive career and motivation theory indicates that the psychological and internal factors with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989b; Dos Santos, 2021c; Kwee, 2021) can impact people's motivations and decision-making processes, particularly in the areas of academic interests, personal considerations, and achievements of education and career goals. In this direction, people's internal thinking and ideas (e.g. psychological and philosophical understanding and thinking) can drive and direct the decision-making processes (Kanekar et al., 2015; Lent & Brown, 2019). Second, the social and external factors with the elements of interests in career development, financial considerations, and surrounding environments and individuals can drive the motivations and decision-making processes of individuals and groups. For example, some studies argued that individuals' motivations and decisions could be directed based on their friends, peers, parents, and relatives (Dos Santos, 2020; Mendez et al., 2017; Olson, 2014).

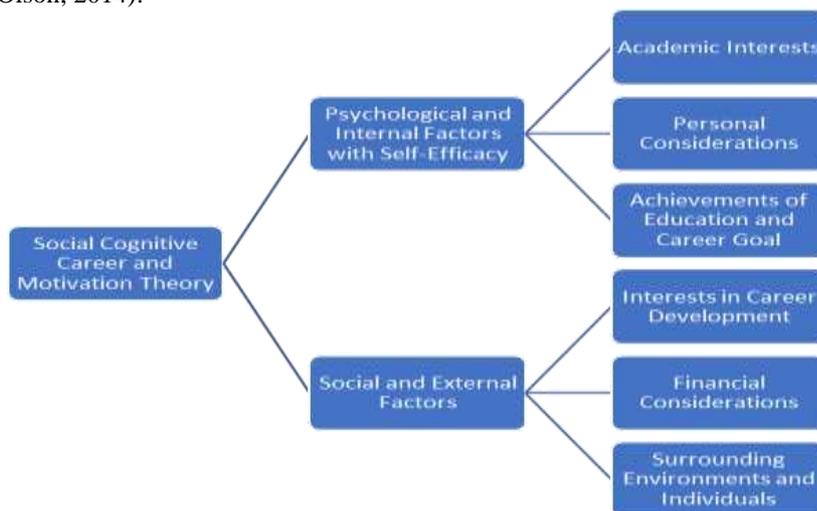


Figure 1
Social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021a, 2021d, 2021e).

Motivations of Foreign Language Learning

According to a recent report (Blanco, 2020), over 30 million people started to learn a new language after social distancing was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows that many people have recently chosen to upgrade their language skills as one of their hobbies. The report outlined the ten most popular languages studied via computer-aided language learning tools, including English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, and Chinese. However, students with different backgrounds are likely to have different learning achievements, outcomes, and goals; Song & Pornsima (2016) employed the attitude/motivation test battery theory to

investigate foreign language learning motivation. Their study found that popular culture and entertainment played an important role in many young people's learning motivation and sense-making processes. Another study (Moritoki, 2018) investigated the motivations for and reasons why citizens in Slovenia decided to learn a foreign language other than German; it found that personal interests, social, economic, and political factors played significant roles in the decision-making process and, more importantly, many Slovenians also took the importance of plurilingualism in Europe into consideration.

Developing multiple skills, such as language proficiency and cultural understanding, has the potential to expand opportunities at different life stages (Dos Santos, 2022b; Guo et al., 2020; Kwee, 2021). Another recent study (Dos Santos, 2021a) found that a large group of nursing students (N=60) would be motivated to gain bilingual proficiency in response to the needs and demands of their international patients who do not speak English or other languages known to the nurses. More importantly, as a valuable additional skill, speaking additional languages has the potential to increase employability. Although different groups of people may have different motivations and reasons for learning a foreign language, it is clear that mastering an additional language could be of significant benefit to them (Dos Santos, 2022a).

Chinese Language Speakers with Professional Backgrounds and Practices: Business and One Belt One Road Initiative

Business and career opportunities play an important role in motivating people to learn a foreign language. Chinese companies and government-supported agencies have contributed a range of different types of investment in South East Asia (Liang et al., 2019), supporting many Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries through the One Belt One Road initiative (Das, 2017; Dos Santos, 2018; Pepermans, 2018; Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2018). To coordinate between targeted countries and China, business professionals and government agencies need to learn Chinese to enable better communication and development. Another study (Karreman et al., 2017) indicated that China invests in a large number of businesses and infrastructure in European cities and regions; however, communication barriers have become one of the key problems between Chinese investors and local leaders (Kwee, 2023).

Dos Santos (2018) found that the development of Chinese business and its international investments have been motivating factors for many Chinese language learners, particularly business professionals. Business and career opportunities are thus among the greatest motivations for Chinese language learning due to the need for multilingualism in countries and regions targeted for Chinese investment, particularly members of the One Belt One Road initiative. Another recent study (Liu et al., 2020) also showed that the Confucius Institutes play an important role in offering Chinese language and culture courses to students in the One Belt One Road initiative countries and regions. As Chinese organisations and government-supported agencies aim to support development in Third World countries and rural communities, many local students want to take advantage of Chinese business and investment opportunities.

Therefore, foreign language speakers with a business background are in great demand in many countries and regions (Kwee, 2023), particularly those who can speak Chinese and who have an understanding of Chinese culture and business practice (Lien & Oh, 2014).

METHOD

Research Design

Case study approach (Yin, 2012) was employed to investigate this study. Case study is one of the popular qualitative research methods in social sciences and education. Unlike other qualitative methods, case study allowed the researcher to gather, collect, capture, and study data from a targeted site for the in-depth investigation. In this case, the researcher collected data and investigated the problem in a private language learning centre in Belgium.

Although many educational establishments, such as Confucius Institutes, secondary schools, and universities offer similar courses to traditional-age learners, the learning motivations and reasons for adult learners are usually neglected in the current research database. Therefore, collecting data and results from adult-based private learning centres are important to understand the motivations and reasons for learning Chinese as a foreign language, particularly in multilingual countries, such as Belgium. Unlike other state-run and governmental sponsored centres and schools, adult-based private learning centres are profit-business organisations which may have flexible enrolment management and admission policies. Also, foreign language courses for academic, general, and special purposes can be developed based on the needs of people, communities, organisations, companies, and groups on request. As these types of adult-based private learning centres may attract learners from all aspects of the state and community, the researcher used this private language learning centre as the site to understand the current study.

Participants and Recruitment

The researcher contacted the private language learning centre in Belgium for the study. The centre administrator agreed to the study and forwarded the study protocol, invitation letter, nature of the study, interview questions, and contact information of the researcher to the sites and parties. All learners in the centre received the abovementioned materials. As a result, 16 participants were willing to join this study and share their stories and understanding with the researcher. As this study has a unique focus, the participants should meet all the following:

- 1) Learning Chinese as their foreign [fourth] language
- 2) Postgraduate degree students or university degree holders
- 3) Have worked in the profession or industry for at least two years
- 4) Non-vulnerable individuals

Data Collection

Three data collection tools were used in this study, including focus group activities, remarkable item sharing, and member-checking interviews. First, the researcher sent the

interview questions to each participant for clarification, which allowed the participants to understand and prepare some of their answers and stories.

During the focus group activities, the participants were grouped in a private space. As there were 16 participants in this study, eight participants joined a single focus group. In other words, two focus group activities were formed. During the focus group activities, the researcher served as the coordinator for the questions and procedures. During the activity, the participants were free to share their ideas, stories, and reasons about Chinese language learning, particularly as their fourth language. During the focus group activities, the researcher used a digital recorder to record the voiced message. No visual images were marked. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus group activities were conducted online via an online live chat platform.

Second, at any time during the data collection procedure, the participants were encouraged to offer a picture of their remarkable items, which were useful for this study, including but not limited to notebooks, pictures, clothes, food, etc. The participants did not need to send the physical items to the researcher. The visual image or picture of the remarkable items should be sent to the researcher's email address.

Third, after the participants completed the data collection procedure, the researcher categorised the materials based on the participants' personal files. Voiced messages were transcribed to written messages. The related materials were sent back to the participants for the member-checking interview sessions. During the member-checking interview sessions, the researcher asked the participants to confirm their stories and visual image. More importantly, the participants were encouraged to add, delete, or edit their ideas and stories. All 16 participants confirmed and agreed with their data.

Data Analysis

The general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) and grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were used to narrow the massive data to meaningful groups and themes. First, the researcher read the raw data multiple times to determine the connections. The researcher used the open-coding technique to categorise the written transcripts into first-level themes and groups. During this stage, 25 themes were categorised. However, it is important to further study and narrow the themes as it is impossible to report a large group of themes for a qualitative study. Second, the researcher used the axial-coding technique to categorise the first-level themes into narrowed themes. As a result, three themes were yielded. Figure 2 outlined the procedure of the data analysis.

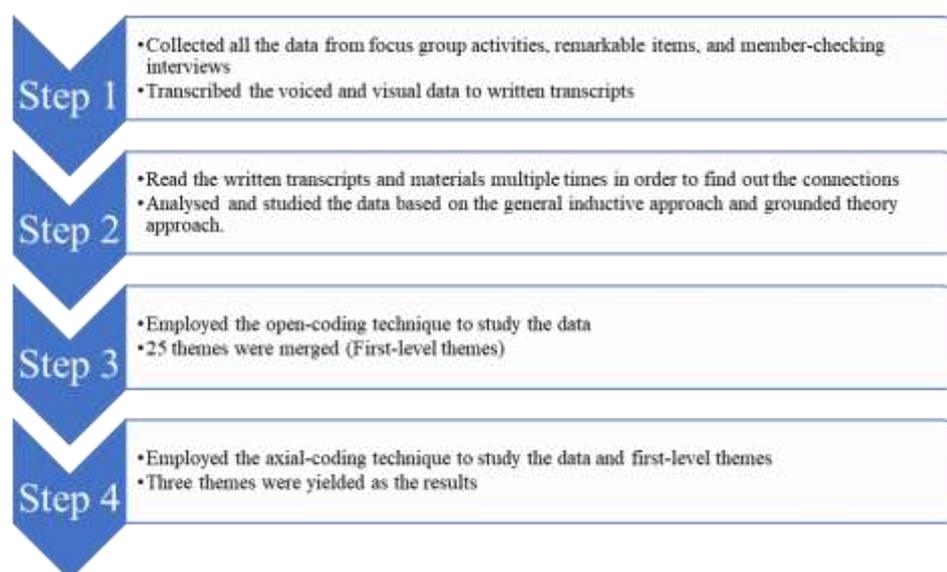


Figure 2
Data Analysis

Human Subject Protection

Privacy is the most important factor in this study. The researcher locked the signed consent forms, personal contacts, voice messages, written transcripts, images, background information of all parties, email conversations, and related data in a password-protected cabinet. Only the researcher can read the data. After the researcher completed the study, the researcher deleted and destroyed the materials to protect the privacy of all parties. The research received support from Woosong University Academic Research Funding 2022 (2022-01-2022-09).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Although the participants were from different families, educational backgrounds, and financial backgrounds, many shared some similar ideas, as many of them are willing to gain new skills and language proficiencies beyond their current language understanding, particularly as fourth language learners. In this case, all participants could handle at least three languages, including their native language, before they came to this school. Although most organisations and agencies in Belgium do not require a fourth foreign language, the current participants continued to develop their Chinese language proficiency and cultural knowledge in language schools as adult learners. All the participants were postgraduate students or university graduates with years of working experience. They expressed a wide range of stories and experiences which may connect to their motivations and reasons for learning Chinese. Please note, the researcher decided to combine the findings and discussion together as a comprehensive chapter for immediate reading and comparison. Table 1 outlines the themes of the study's findings.

Table 1
Themes

Themes
It is Enough for European Languages: Beyond the Border
Career Development: Opportunities in East Asia and South East Asia
Friendships, Networks, and Education: Chinese Immigrants and Professionals in Europe

It is Enough for European Languages: Beyond the Border

Currently, there are 24 official languages in the European Union, including Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, and Swedish (Iskra, 2022). All these languages originate in the European continent and are mostly spoken in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Although Spanish and Portuguese are widely spoken in South America, they are considered European languages due to their linguistic roots (Dos Santos, 2021b; Fishman, 2001; Potowski, 2018). The study participants indicated that they wanted to gain proficiency and cultural understanding in new languages beyond the European languages traditionally taught in Belgian schools, and Chinese as a foreign language has therefore become one of their choices. The following two stories demonstrate the desire to gain an additional language and culture:

...most of the people in Belgium learned English as their second [foreign] language because it is useful and managed by the school and government...we learnt English in school...also, we needed to learn one more language because our country [Belgium] has three languages...Dutch, French, and German...but I don't want to learn German as my fourth [foreign] language anymore...I want to learn a new language...beyond another European language...it is too narrow...if I learn one more European language...(Participant #3)

...Europe is very tiny...and the European Union is only a small union with only 27 member states after Brexit...many languages and cultures...cannot be spoken and used outside of the border...I don't see it is useful to learn Finnish beyond the border of Finland...I want to learn something new beyond our horizons...Chinese is very useful because I can speak it in many Asian countries...and even many communities internationally...beyond the English language...(Participant #4)

Some recent studies (Hong, 2018; Wong & Xiao, 2010) have shown that the international position of Chinese economic and political development has prompted many students and adult learners to choose Chinese as their foreign language. The Chinese language, including both Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese Chinese, is widely spoken in many communities internationally, including but not limited to mainland China, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Korea, Japan, United States, and the United Kingdom, particularly in Chinatown and Chinese communities (Bradley, 2019). Therefore, many participants argued that learning Chinese could expand their horizons and develop their understanding of different cultures in many countries:

...people in Singapore speak English and Chinese...I want to see how this south-eastern Asian country...can manage multilingualism...with its unique

culture...although we can find such similar cultures and situations in Europe...such as Malta...but it is interesting...because English and Chinese can harmonise together in Singapore...but not a unique language of Singapore...(Participant #6)

According to Blanco (2020), Chinese was one of the ten most popular foreign languages for learners internationally in 2020. It is not uncommon to encounter fluent English speakers or English language learners worldwide. Still, in recent decades, a large number of people have begun to learn Chinese as a foreign language or additional language in response to promotion by the Chinese government, Chinese business, and the attractiveness of opportunities in East Asia (Liang et al., 2019). In our case study, many participants indicated that they were motivated to learn Chinese because they often met people who could speak English and Chinese fluently. Furthermore, it is common for students who don't want to learn English to choose Chinese as their foreign or additional language (J. Wang et al., 2009). Therefore, Chinese may become a key communication tool besides English in many countries and communities. Our research captured two interesting stories reflecting this:

...as we can see in Ireland and the United Kingdom...many foreign language learners...if they do not like Spanish or so, they will select Chinese as their additional language...because they do not need to learn English...it will be interesting...if we can speak Chinese as the Lingua Franca...why not give us a try...if we can speak and read Chinese...we can communicate with other people in Chinese...from different continent...(Participant #9)

...I speak English to other Italian, Portuguese, Swedish, and Finnish people in Europe...because we cannot speak the language of their native country...English is the common language here...but I can speak English already...I want to speak a language that can be used in many Asian countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam...but I cannot learn Malaysian or Vietnamese...as I don't have additional time...but Chinese plays this role...because many people can speak Chinese as their additional language there...(Participant #12)

In line with previous studies using the social cognitive career and motivation theory (Dos Santos, 2021a, 2021d, 2021e), many participants indicated that they wanted to learn a new foreign language with its roots outside Europe so they could use it as a bridge to connect with people in the Asian region. As some scholars have noted (Hong, 2018; Wong & Xiao, 2010), Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese Chinese play significant roles in many fields, including business, trading, education, science, and education. Therefore, gaining the Chinese language and associated cultural understanding may further expand the horizons of the participants (Bradley, 2019), particularly access to Chinese heritage and Chinese communities internationally.

Career Development: Opportunities in East Asia and South East Asia

Many studies have reported the significant expansion of Chinese businesses and markets into the European Union over the past decade. Besides the One Belt One Road initiative (Das, 2017; Dos Santos, 2018; Pepermans, 2018; Punyaratabandhu &

Swaspitchayaskun, 2018), some European Union Member States, such as Greece, have established long-term business agreements with Chinese organisations. Chinese national nuclear companies have expanded their business and technology into Europe over the past decade (Zhang, 2019). Understanding the Chinese language, culture, and approach to business management is an important prerequisite to gaining employment or competitive advantage in the many opportunities associated with Chinese economic development. Therefore, many participants in our study indicated that they would like to learn the Chinese language and culture to further their career opportunities (Freudenstein, 2019):

...although, there are some conflicts between the European Union and the Chinese government...I still can see the business opportunities...politics is not something that we can control...but we can control our business background and language benefits and advantages...for business and career development...I want to learn about Chinese people I want to do business in China...and bring some Chinese business and products to Belgium...for trading...(Participant #8)

Many participants also indicated that understanding the Chinese language and culture might further expand their business and career opportunities in East Asia and South East Asia. Chinese culture and tradition have exerted a long-term political and geographic influence in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines for centuries Strangio (2020). Although many countries have gained their independence, the Chinese communities, languages, and traditions continue to influence these South East Asian countries. In our case study, many participants held the opinion that the Chinese language is still significantly useful in these countries (Bradley, 2019) and that knowing it would open their opportunities and horizons in them:

...I want to do business in China and other south-eastern Asian countries...I can speak English already...it is very hard to handle Vietnamese, Thai, Malaysian, and Cambodian...as additional languages...because these languages are very limited...to their own country...just like the case in Europe...Chinese plays an international role in these countries...besides English...it is a great opportunity if I can speak Chinese...to the Chinese communities and English to the local communities...(Participant #2)

As previous studies using the social cognitive career and motivation theory have shown (Dos Santos, 2021a, 2021d, 2021e), the Chinese language, organisations, and Chinese-speaking communities are widely distributed in many parts of the world, particularly in the One Belt One Road initiative countries and regions (Das, 2017; Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2018). Learning motivations for Chinese as a foreign language usually rely on opportunities with Chinese organisations (Dos Santos, 2018). Although the study participants indicated that gaining English language proficiency may deliver similar outcomes and achievements, they wanted to set themselves apart by learning foreign languages other than English (Yinghui & Teng Teng, 2019). Professional networks and academic connections also played significant roles in the motivation for learning Chinese as a foreign language. A recent study (Foo et al., 2020) indicated that,

due to Chinese economic and financial development, many people have decided to learn Chinese to gain jobs and business opportunities, particularly in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries.

Friendships, Networks, and Education: Chinese Immigrants and Professionals in Europe

In addition to offering an alternative choice for foreign language learning, many participants also said that Chinese might offer common ground for them to meet friends and peers internationally. Language schools, language exchange groups, and international professionals can often meet through shared interests, and hobbies (Chen & Du, 2022), and our participants said that their common Chinese language and cultural interests could offer a way to meet new friends. Foreign language learning may also allow people of different ages to join a learning peer group (Berggren et al., 2020). Two interesting stories from the interviews reflected these views about study abroad experiences with international peers and friends:

...I completed a master's degree previously...I went to do an exchange...for an academic year...I met a lot of friends who want to learn about Belgium and European culture...regardless of their age and background...people met together because they need to have a common interest...if we learn Chinese or speak Chinese...I can meet friends who are learning Chinese or speak Chinese too...(Participant #14)

...I am thinking of doing a master's degree in Chinese-European business trading in the future...there are some good academic programmes in Europe...I can meet some good friends and classmates in the programme from Europe, China, and international places...I am planning to go to China for business...so I want to learn Chinese and stay in China...(Participant #1)

Over the past few decades, Europe and the European Union have absorbed many international expats, immigrants, and refugees from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (Brekke & Brochmann, 2015; Postelnicescu, 2016). Although immigration policy does not discriminate against people with different backgrounds, people from non-European regions have different tangible and intangible backgrounds and cultural understanding. The policy of multiculturalism (Chin, 2017; Irving, 2011) in Europe encourages people from different backgrounds to maintain their own language and traditions. In our study, many participants said that they would like to learn Chinese so they could offer help and participate in East Asian communities with an understanding of their culture. They believed learning Chinese was a useful tool to facilitate joining in with the community:

...Chinese community is one of the largest foreign groups in Belgium...many people come here to Belgium...they can speak Chinese and English...but not all of them can speak French, Dutch, and German...but I want to help them...because of my job nature...I want to offer help to Chinese immigrants...I am here to learn Chinese and Chinese culture...because I want to see if I can enter their community and meet friends...from China...and Chinese speakers...(Participants #5)

Besides immigrants from Chinese-speaking countries and communities, many Chinese and Chinese-speaking international professionals and expats come to Belgium for career development. Although some expats can speak French, Dutch, and/or German, most speak Chinese and English as their daily language. Some may leave Belgium after several years to further their careers (Litvak & Pomozova, 2021), and may therefore decide not to learn French, Dutch, and/or German. Many of our participants reported that they wanted to learn Chinese to establish friendships and networks with Chinese professionals:

...in the business field...I can speak French, English, and German...I can do business with people in Europe and North America...but I cannot speak any Asian languages...The Chinese language is very useful because many businesses and firms are investing their money in Europe...I want to see if I can gain some Chinese network and move to China for business trading...but if I want to gain the network, it is better to learn Chinese and learn Chinese culture...at least I can tell people I like China...(Participant #14)

Lastly, Belgian higher education institutions have excellent reputations and research outputs, and in recent decades, many international students have decided to come to Belgium for undergraduate education, postgraduate training, and research activities. As many of the academic programmes are offered in English, international students do not need to have significant French, Dutch, and/or German to meet the admission requirements, with many departments requiring acceptable English language instead. Many of our participants said they wanted to learn Chinese so they could chat and have intelligent conversation with Chinese speakers, particularly in academia:

...many excellent science research projects are hosted by Chinese scientists...I want to study in a postgraduate institution with Chinese classmates and Chinese researchers...because scientists want to exchange different ideas with people from other backgrounds...Chinese is a very good tool...because I can exchange my ideas with people from the East Asian region...(Participant #15)

As other studies using social cognitive career and motivation theory have shown (Dos Santos, 2021a, 2021d, 2021e), the participants indicated that many immigrants, international students, and international expats decide to come to Europe because of globalisation and freedom of movement. In this study, the participants sought to gain proficiency in the Chinese language and knowledge of Chinese culture so they could engage with professional networks for community work, academic opportunities, and for educational development. A recent study (Li, 2020) found that many Chinese undergraduates, postgraduate students, and researchers have decided to come to Europe to further their education. The findings of this study complement those of previous studies, particularly about the migration of Chinese professionals into global communities, regardless of geographic locations. Therefore, the participants in this study indicated that learning Chinese as a foreign language would better prepare them for the professional community (Liu et al., 2020; Punyaratabandhu & Swaspitchayaskun, 2018; Yinghui & Teng Teng, 2019).

LIMITATIONS

First, the current study collected data from Belgium. Although the case study in Belgium may further reflect the situations and learning motivations of European learners, it is important to expand the background of this study in order to outline the wider picture of Chinese language learning in the European environment. Therefore, future research studies may collect data from learners in other European countries and regions.

Second, although Chinese language learning is one of the popular foreign language options for Belgium and European language learners, other foreign languages can also play roles in the foreign language learning fields. Therefore, future research studies may investigate other languages, such as Arabic, Japanese, Thai etc., as the means for motivations and decision-making processes.

Third, the study collected data from a private language learning centre in Belgium. However, students in the organisations and associations may also learn foreign languages as their Professional Development Hours. In this case, it is important to investigate the motivations and decision-making processes of these groups of learners who want to learn a foreign language for their Professional Development Hours.

CONTRIBUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

Five contributions have been categorised. First, this study captured the voices and opinions of Chinese language learners in Belgium. Although Chinese language learning is one of the popular developments and directions in the field of foreign language education, there are only a few studies focused on the decision-making processes and decisions of Chinese language learning in Belgium. Therefore, the results of this study have filled the research gaps in this area.

Second, Chinese language learning is not the most popular option for many European learners, particularly in Belgium. However, it is important to understand why foreign language learners decide to select Chinese as their goal and achievement. Based on the qualitative data from this group of Chinese language learners in the centre, the results of this study have filled the research gaps in this area.

Third, foreign language learning is one of the popular educational topics. However, many of the studies focused on English as a foreign language curriculum and development. Although over the past decades, teaching Chinese as a foreign language has become popular, most of the studies focused on teaching methods. The results of this study will fill the gaps in the fields of learning motivations of Chinese language learners in the European environment.

Fourth, many teaching Chinese as a foreign language focus on the problems and situations in the Confucius Institutes. Private language learning centres and institutions also offer similar courses and programmes. However, only a few studies focus on the learners' behaviours and motivations of these groups of students. The results of this study will fill the research and practice gaps of Chinese language learners in private learning centres and the problems in these private centres internationally.

Fifth, many language learning studies mainly focus on the students' achievements and behaviours in traditional schools and university environments. However, adult learners and learners in private learning centres are neglected. It is important to understand the investigate adult learners' and learners' behaviours beyond the traditional school environments. The results of this study will fill the research and practice gaps for adult learners, particularly foreign language learners in European environments.

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