



# Education Quarterly Reviews

**Taddese, Esayas Teshome. (2019), A Study on Students' Motivation to Learn Chinese Culture Course: The Case of 2018 Northeast Normal University International Students. In: *Education Quarterly Reviews*, Vol.2, No.1, 116-121.**

ISSN 2621-5799

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1993.02.01.44

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>

Published by:  
The Asian Institute of Research

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# A Study on Students' Motivation to Learn Chinese Culture Course: The Case of 2018 Northeast Normal University International Students

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## Abstract

This study explored international students' motivation toward learning the Chinese culture course. Specifically, the study focused on investigating what interest the students towards the Chinese culture course. The study also looked into the challenges of international students faced while studying the Chinese culture course. To meet these objectives, the study used a descriptive survey design with a mixed method. Questionnaire and interviews were used to collect data from a sample of 38 international students from 7 colleges in Northeast Normal University (NENU). Finally, the finding indicated that international students at NENU are curious to learn the Chinese culture course. The respondents are keen to learn the culture they live in during their study period. Therefore, the study concluded that international students are studying the Chinese culture course not only because the course is compulsory, but also they are also keen to learn the Chinese culture course.

**Keywords:** Culture, International Students, Motivation

## I. Introduction

Motivation is the energy that drives human beings toward achieving a goal. In the same vein, students' motivation is very important for the successful delivery of the course because motivation is the energy that directs all of us toward achieving a certain goal (Broussard & Garrison, 2004). And, the prime source of motivation is inherent in all of us. Educational psychologists have long documented the importance of motivation for supporting students learning regardless of what they are learning. That means if one is motivated towards what he/she is studying, it is likely that one will be successful. In line with this point, Broussard and Garrison (2004) stated that motivation is the characteristic that drives us to do or not to do something we are engaged in. It is also good to underline that our perception is the source of our motivation. Freud, who is known as a father of the school of psychology, wrote that humans are motivated to act as a result of perceived internal imbalances in the body (Weiner, 1980). It means motivation is directly linked to individual performance and is used as a catalyzer for every individual learner to complete a study and task in a much better way than they usually do. Similarly, some people have a very strong internal interest in other cultures, in discovering things that are different, in learning about other perspectives. That can be called an intrinsic interest, and therefore an internal motivation to learn about something new including culture. The other thing one can be motivated by is the need to develop confidence in multicultural situations. So one might already instinctively feel positive about interacting with people from other cultures and the more positive situations you associate with such interactions, the more you want to experience them.

With these facts in mind, there is a tradition of teaching Chinese culture course in Chinese Universities for international students coming to China. The course is mainly about Chinese culture, history, and geography. As one of the Universities run by Chinese Ministry of Education, Northeast Normal University also gives the Chinese culture course to its international students coming from over 100 hundred different countries under the CSC and MOFCOM scholarship schemes. The course is not directly related to the majors of students, yet it is a compulsory requirement to get one's diploma at the end of the study period. The course is designed principally to introduce international students with Chinese culture and history. However, for the effective delivery of this course, understanding the students' motivation towards learning the course is helpful. Thus this study was undertaken with the intention to explore the motivation of the students towards learning the Chinese culture course and to see if there are factors that deter the students learning.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Chinese culture course is one of the courses given to all international students in the fall semester every year at Northeast Normal University. However, as one of the students taking the course, the researcher noticed some students who are missing classes and some students who usually come very late to class. In addition to this, since the course delivery is one way it is very difficult to notice the motivation of learners. This made the researcher wonder about the motivation of the students towards learning the Chinese culture course. Because, it is imperative to question the motivation of the learners towards learning a course, for it is a very important concept that explains why people think, behaves and does as they do as stated in (Weiner, 1992). Motivation is also a notable factor in our success and failure. Thus, this study explored international students' motivation toward learning the Chinese culture course.

### **Research Questions**

The study was led by the following guiding research questions

1. How do international students perceive learning the Chinese culture course?
2. What interest international students towards learning Chinese culture course?
3. What challenges do students face when learning Chinese culture?

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to examine the international students' motivation towards learning the Chinese culture course at Northeast Normal University.

The Specific objectives of the study include:

1. to examine the perception of international students towards learning Chinese culture course
2. to identify what interest the international students to study the Chinese culture course.
3. to identify the challenges the students face when learning the Chinese culture course.

## **II. Background of the Study**

Culture is an extremely hard term to explain. Much of the difficulties stem from the different usages of the term as it was increasingly employed throughout time in history (Spencer-Oatey, 2012). As a result, different philosophers have defined culture differently. For example, Tyler (1870) cited by Averuch (1998) defined culture as "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." For Furstenberg (2010), "culture is a highly complex, elusive, multilayered notion that encompasses many different and overlapping areas and that inherently defies easy categorization and classification." Another philosopher called Hofstede (1994) cited in Spencer-Oatey (2012) explained that culture is the collective programming of the mind which differentiates the members of one group or category of people from another. Culture in this sense is a system of collectively held values. It is learned patterns of behavior. Individuals are not born with any kinds of cultural values or thinking. Individuals

are born into a culture, and they subsequently learn how to behave within their society. Individuals can also learn the culture of a foreign society in cases when they get opportunities to live out of their society. In this case, learning the culture of a society, one lives in is believed to help one by making one's stay smooth and simple. This is because culture simply is not simply a body of knowledge but rather a framework in which people live their lives and communicate shared meanings with each other.

Motivation, on the other hand, is basically a concept concerned with the strength and direction of behavior and the factors that influence people to behave in certain ways. It plays a central role in learners' achievement. It is the inner state or force that drives, directs and endures behavior towards achieving a certain goal. However, it is usually difficult to define what motivation is all about exactly. Measuring motivation in education is also a challenging practice. This challenge is partly because of the complexity to operationally define motivation (Mubeen and Reid, 2014). The key to measuring motivation must be to look for behaviors indicating high motivation and low motivation. However, most approaches have relied on self-report and this can only measure what respondents think about themselves and may or may not reflect reality (Danili and Reid, 2004).

The topic of teaching and learning culture has attracted the attention of lots of researchers and much has been written about the role of culture in foreign language instruction over the past few decades. Yet the emphasis is always on language teaching and learning than teaching culture. In reality; however, the language of a society cannot be separated from the culture of the society because culture comprises the "patterns of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations" (Goode et al., 2000). Strengthening international students' cultural awareness is pivotal for their language learning. It can also help them to familiarize them themselves very easily to the society they live in. To this end, the practice of conducting an independent culture course in China and specifically in Northeast Normal University is of paramount advantage for international students. Teaching culture raises an understanding of and reduces prejudice towards other cultures and peoples. By emphasizing the cultural content teachers can help students to accept the legitimacy of cultural differences among peoples. Thus, Byram (1991) concluded that "cultural knowledge or information should have a beneficial effect on attitudes and understanding in the longer term and, in the short term, also helps to make lessons more attractive and interesting." Integration of the study of language with the study of culture serves the purpose in foreign language learning of developing communicative competence, cultural awareness, and reinforcing tolerance, a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the richness of diverse cultures. However, culture teaching cannot be regarded as teachers do in grammar teaching. Cultural teaching needs to focus on exploration and description as opposed to teaching grammar because the rules of creating meanings are dynamic (Tanriverdi, 2008). That is cultural understanding constructive learning. Robinson (1985), Adamowski (1990) and Tseng (2002) supported the constructive view of culture learning. They view cultural understanding as a shared process in which every individual constructs his/her own meaning with his/her internal cognitive map.

### III. Methods

This study used a descriptive survey design with a mixed method. The use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches at a time, as pointed out by Niglas (2004), for the same phenomena helps to come up with a more reliable finding. The population of the study is the international students taking the Chinese culture course at Northeast Normal University in the fall semester of the year 2018. The study used 38 students drawn by simple random sampling technique. This study used a questionnaire and interview as a tool for data collection. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was employed to analyze quantitative data from the questionnaires, and the qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed thematically.

#### IV. Findings and Discussion

##### Research Question-1: How do international students perceive learning about the Chinese culture course?

The study examined the students' curiosity to learn the Chinese culture. When responding to questions about their curiosity for learning Chinese culture, 86.84% respondent indicated that they are very much curious to learn about the Chinese culture course. 7.9% of respondents didn't decide on this issue whereas the remaining 5.26% were found as not interested in the course. On the other hand 76.4 % of the respondents like the content of the Chinese culture course material. And many of the participants in this study never feel embarrassed to participate in the Chinese culture course class. They enjoy it as implied by 81.6% of the participants. (See the table given below for the detail).

No	Statement	No. Resp.	Responses in Frequency and Percentage									
			SDA		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		SA	
			F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Content of course book is interesting	38	1	2.6			8	21.1	21	55.3	8	21.1
2	I am curious to earn the Chinese culture course	38	1	2.1	1	2.1	3	7.9	14	36.8	19	50
3	It embarrasses me to volunteer participation in Chinese culture class	38	11	28.9	10	26.3	10	26.3	4	10.5	3	7.9
4	Studying Chinese culture makes my stay in China simple and smooth	38	1	2.6	1	2.6	6	15.8	24	63.2	6	15.6
5	I am studying the Chinese culture course seriously like the other courses	38	3	7.9	-	-	9	23.7	20	52.6	6	15.8
6	I am studying Chinese culture course only because it is a compulsory course	38	8	21.1	18	47.4	5	13.2	4	10.5	3	7.9
7	I am interested in the Chinese culture course because it is informative	38	-	-	4	10.5	6	15.8	15	39.5	13	34.2
8	Studying the Chinese culture course is a burden for me	38	21	55.3	15	39.5	2	5.3	-	-	-	-
9	I enjoy going to the Chinese culture course	38	2	5.3	-	-	5	13.2	18	47.4	13	34.2
10	I have never missed the Chinese culture course class since I started it	38	3	7.9	8	21.1	4	10.5	8	21.1	15	39.5
11	I usually look for new cultural elements from my Chinese culture class	38	-	-	-	-	3	7.9	24	63.2	11	28.9
12	Studying the Chinese culture course is helpful to study the Chinese language easily	38	2	5.3	3	7.9	13	34.2	10	26.3	10	26.3
13	I would enjoy my study if there were no Chinese culture course	38	16	42.1	16	42.1	6	15.8	-	-	-	-
14	I am studying a Chinese culture course just for a pass status	38	20	52.6	13	34.2	4	10.5	1	2.6	-	-
15	The teacher's way of teaching interests me	38	-	-	-	-	4	10.5	18	47.4	16	42.1
16	The teaching movies and documentaries are interesting	38	1	2.6	-	-	6	15.8	20	52.6	11	28.9

The table implies international students are inquisitive to learn the culture of the host country, China. They indicated that they are studying the Chinese culture course not only because it is a compulsory course, but also they are interested in learning culture they are living in. In this case, 68.42% of respondents are studying the course not because it is obligatory but because they are interested in it. This shows that international students are nose and open-minded to learn the culture they live in during their study period. 73.68% of the participants confirmed that the course is informative. It gives information about the culture and history of the Chinese together. 94.73% of respondents don't consider the course a burden. They consider it an informative and relevant course to take. The participants of this study also mentioned that studying Chinese culture is helpful to learn the Chinese language better. Majority of the respondents claimed that they are learning the Chinese culture course not only to get a pass status but also to really know about the Chinese people culture and history. This, in turn, is helpful to better understand and perform in the Chinese language course. Nault (2006) also reasoned that the link between language and culture is significant in foreign language education because culture plays a role in helping learners to be proficient in the target language.

### **Research Question-2: What interest international students towards learning Chinese culture course?**

The second objective of the study was to examine what interest the international students in studying the Chinese culture course. The course is obviously a compulsory course, but beyond this what is there that interests the learners. To find the answer to the question respondents were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with the questionnaire. The first question was about the cultural contents of the course book. In response to this question, 76.31% of the respondents testified that the contents of the course book are interesting. The response indicates that the Chinese course material has interesting contents that international students can enjoy. Having interesting contents in course materials like this one is very important to win the interests of learners. The participants also boldly indicated the attributes of the course instructor who made the course more attractive to the learners. They liked the movies the instructor brings to class for teaching the course. In line with this a study by Dema Moeller (2012), argued that technologies like movies and audios have changed the nature of instruction make learning more effective and engage students actively. The tabular presentation of the respondents' opinion is given in the table above. As a result, 68.42% of the respondents indicated that they study the course very seriously like any other course whereas 23.68% didn't show their position and the remaining 7.9% were not in agreement with this conclusion. In addition to this 78.95 % of the respondents believe that learning the Chinese culture would make their stay here in China simple and easy. Here again, 15.79% didn't show their position. The remaining respondents are opposed to this inference.

### **Research Question 3: What challenges do students face when learning Chinese culture?**

When asked in the open-ended questionnaire about the challenges of studying the Chinese culture course, most of the respondents mentioned the evening class time along with the weather condition, which is colder at night and the bulk content of the course material as challenges in following up the course. Respondents also motioned that memorizing the years, dates and names of emperors in the history of China is difficult. However, almost all of the respondents indicated that they are very much interested in learning and to know about Chinese history, culture and geography. The data obtained from the interview also compliment this opinion. Still, the weather and the class time are mentioned as challenges. The interviewees of the study also motioned class time is not enough compared to the course material content to be covered. Thus rushing to cover the content is another problem.

## **V. Conclusions**

The study was basically conducted to answer the following three guiding questions:

1. How do international students perceive learning about the Chinese culture course?
2. What interest international students towards learning Chinese culture course?
3. What challenges do students face when learning the Chinese culture course?

The Chinese culture course was fundamentally commenced to familiarize international students with the culture, history, and geography of China. It is one of the fundamental courses for every scholarship students. However,

this requirement alone doesn't make the course delivery fruitful. The learners' interest towards learning the course is very important. And that is what this study looked into. According to the finding discussed in the preceding section, international students aren't studying only because the course is compulsory but also because they are interested in learning the Chinese culture, history and geography. The study also mentioned that the participants perceived their participation positively in the course, for the course is informative. They considered it as a good opportunity to learn Chinese culture and history. The investigation again indicated that the learners believed that learning the Chinese culture helps in studying the Chinese language because culture and language are intertwined. Studies on teaching culture have also shown that language and culture are closely related (Kuang, 2007; Schulz, 2007; Brown, 2007; Savignon & Sysoyev, 2005; & Tang, 1999). The study determined that international students at Northeast Normal University are intrinsically motivated to learn the culture of the hosting country-China. In addition to these, the content of the course book, the teacher's lecture, the movies and documentaries the teacher brings to class for teaching purpose made the international students interested in the course. That means instructional interventions applied by the teacher to elicit and stimulate student motivation are effective. Furthermore, it is mentioned that doing educational field trips at least around the campus area including the museums in Changchun and Jilin would make the course delivery more effective by enhancing students' motivation and learning.

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