

A Literature Review of Cultural Identity, Learning Motivation, and Learning Outcomes in Japanese Learning among Chinese Students

Jiaqi Zhong*

Nanjing Audit University Jinshen College, Nanjing, China

*Corresponding author: Jiaqi Zhong.

Abstract

This paper adopts a narrative literature review approach and includes 24 representative studies, drawing mainly on empirical and review articles published in SSCI/CSSCI-indexed journals over the past two decades, while also incorporating a small number of foundational theoretical studies and one highly relevant Japanese-language article. The review focuses on the relationships among Chinese cultural identity, Japanese cultural identity, learning motivation, and learning outcomes in Japanese learning among Chinese students. It first constructs an analytical framework of identity-motivation-outcomes by integrating cultural identity theory, the investment model, self-determination theory, and the L2 Motivational Self System. It then examines empirical studies on Chinese learners of Japanese to analyze how interest in Japanese culture, intercultural orientation, nationalism, multilingual identity tensions, the gate-keeping role of English as a global language, and learning experience shape motivation and learning outcomes. Finally, it summarizes major debates, methodological limitations, and theoretical contributions in the existing literature. The review argues that cultural identity does not affect learning outcomes directly; rather, its influence is mediated by learning motivation and learning experience and further moderated by specific social contexts, thus producing a complex identity-motivation-outcomes mechanism. Existing research still shows limitations in the conceptualization of cultural identity, the measurement of learning outcomes, and the construction of integrated explanatory models. Future research should combine longitudinal designs, mixed methods, and more objective indicators of proficiency to explain this mechanism more systematically.

Keywords

Chinese students, Japanese learning, cultural identity, learning motivation, learning outcomes

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the continued expansion of China-Japan interactions in educational exchange, popular culture, tourism, and industrial cooperation, more and more Chinese students have chosen to learn Japanese. However, Japanese learning among Chinese students is not merely a process of acquiring linguistic skills; it is also a complex process involving cultural identity, identity negotiation, intercultural understanding, learning motivation, and learning outcomes [1-5]. Traditional second language research has long acknowledged the importance of motivation in language learning [6-10]. More recent studies, however, increasingly argue that

whether learners genuinely invest in language learning, whether they sustain participation, and whether they can translate such investment into outcomes are also shaped by cultural belonging, social context, capital structures, and learning experience [3-5,11]. In the specific context of Chinese students learning Japanese, the sources of motivation are clearly diverse. Learners may be motivated by Japanese language and culture, anime and games, study-abroad opportunities, and employment prospects [14-16,18-19,23]. At the same time, this process is constrained by multiple factors, including Chinese cultural identity, historical memory, media narratives, changes in China-Japan relations, and the gate-keeping role of English as a global language in the educational system [12-13,17,21-24]. Therefore, explaining Japanese learning among Chinese students solely in terms of liking Japanese culture or having an interest in the language is overly simplistic. This paper adopts a narrative literature review approach and provides a synthesis of 24 representative studies. The selection is based primarily on empirical and review studies published in SSCI/CSSCI-indexed journals over the past two decades, supplemented by a small number of foundational theoretical works and one highly relevant Japanese-language study, so as to balance recency and theoretical depth. The paper addresses three questions: first, what theoretical frameworks have been used to explain cultural identity, learning motivation, and learning outcomes; second, what themes, consensus, and debates characterize existing research on Chinese students learning Japanese; and third, what limitations remain and how future research may move forward. This review argues that cultural identity does not influence learning outcomes directly. Instead, its effects are mediated by learning motivation and learning experience and moderated by specific social contexts, thereby producing a complex identity-motivation-outcomes mechanism.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Analytical Framework

2.1 Cultural Identity Theory: Explaining the Starting Variable

A core consensus in identity research is that language learning is not only the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and skills, but also a process in which learners continually negotiate who they are and whom they wish to become within social relations. Norton argues that learner identity is multiple, fluid, and situated, and that even highly motivated learners do not necessarily have equal opportunities for expression or equal access to discourse communities [1]. This perspective provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding unequal participation in language learning. Building on this line of thought, Berry's acculturation theory classifies responses to cultural contact into integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization, thus offering a classic framework for understanding how learners position themselves between their original culture and the target culture [2]. Subsequent studies, however, have made it clear that cultural identity cannot be reduced to a binary choice between preserving one's own culture and accepting the target culture. Schwartz et al. emphasize that acculturation should be examined through at least three distinct dimensions-cultural practices, cultural values, and cultural identifications-thereby showing that cultural identity itself is multidimensional, stratified, and dynamic [3]. Accordingly, in the context of Chinese students learning Japanese, Chinese cultural identity and Japanese cultural identity should not be treated as static and mutually exclusive labels, but rather as cultural positions that are continuously negotiated and reconstructed.

2.2 The Investment Model: Linking Identity and Motivation

If cultural identity theory explains where the influence begins, the investment model helps explain how identity is translated into actual learning engagement. Darwin and Norton argue that a learner's willingness to invest in a language is not determined solely by personal desire; it is also shaped by the distribution of capital, ideological structures, and social evaluation systems [4]. In other words, cultural identity matters not because it directly produces language ability, but because it shapes whether and how learners are willing and able to sustain their investment in language learning under particular social conditions. This perspective is also supported by later review studies. Norton and Toohey show that identity, investment, social change, and language learning are deeply intertwined, and that participation opportunities and learning trajectories are always embedded in concrete structures of power and social context [5]. For Chinese students learning Japanese, the investment model is especially useful for explaining a key issue: why some students who are similarly interested in Japanese culture continue to invest and develop a stable learning trajectory, whereas others reduce or discontinue their engagement due to social expectations, political contexts, or unequal access to educational resources.

2.3 Motivation Theories: Explaining the Pathway from Identity to Outcomes

Recognizing the importance of cultural identity is not sufficient in itself to explain how it affects learning outcomes. A major problem in the existing literature is that if motivation is treated as a single undifferentiated variable, it becomes difficult to explain why learners with similar interests show different levels of persistence, engagement, and eventual achievement. In this respect, motivation theories provide an important explanatory pathway. Within self-determination theory, Noels et al. show that more autonomous forms of motivation, such as intrinsic motivation and identified regulation, tend to be associated with stronger persistence, lower anxiety, and greater engagement, whereas externally imposed motivation is more fragile [6]. From a more traditional perspective, Masgoret and Gardner's meta-analysis also demonstrates a stable relationship between motivation and second language learning outcomes [7]. Since the early twenty-first century, motivation research has increasingly shifted toward a self-system perspective. Al-Hoorie's meta-analysis indicates that the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience all significantly predict intended effort, although their predictive power for objective achievement is weaker [8]. Csizér's synthesis further shows that this framework has strong explanatory value in multilingual learning and across different language contexts [9]. Dörnyei especially emphasizes that the L2 learning experience, though often underestimated, may be the key dimension connecting identity, context, and sustained learning [10]. Aryadoust et al. also note that current motivation research increasingly examines the combined role of identity, affect, and social context rather than treating motivation as an isolated psychological trait [11]. Together, these studies suggest that in the case of Chinese students learning Japanese, the effect of cultural identity on learning outcomes is more likely to operate through pathways such as motivational orientation, learning experience, and sustained engagement.

3. Research Progress on Chinese Students Learning Japanese

3.1 Cultural Identity, Intercultural Orientation, and Learning Motivation

In international research, the relationships among cultural identity, learning motivation, and language outcomes have become increasingly explicit. Peng and Patterson, in their study of international students learning English, found that ethnic identity was negatively associated with self-perceived English proficiency, but that this relationship was partially mediated by motivation; by contrast, identification with the target culture promoted language proficiency through increased motivation [12]. Similarly, Taušová et al. found that lower perceived cultural distance, higher language proficiency, and more positive acculturation orientations contributed to better psychological and sociocultural adjustment [13]. Although these studies do not focus on Chinese learners of Japanese, they jointly point to a crucial mechanism: cultural identity does not usually determine learning outcomes directly, but rather influences learning engagement and outcomes through motivation and adaptation processes. In the specific context of Chinese students learning Japanese, research has clearly moved toward an integrated explanation involving motivation, identity, and context. Gao and Lv argue that Chinese learners do not always begin Japanese learning with high enthusiasm; instead, many gradually develop relatively stable motivation as they come to better understand Japanese society and expand their own horizons [14]. Lv, Gao, and Teo further find that even when China-Japan relations fluctuate, mainland Chinese learners of Japanese may still maintain relatively stable intercultural orientations, suggesting that language learning itself can promote more complex and open understandings of the target culture [15]. Teo et al., from the perspective of posture, show that Japanese-related products, employment opportunities, and cultural activities strengthen motivation, whereas media representations of Japan and narratives of bilateral relations shape learners' willingness for intercultural communication [16]. Taken together, these studies indicate that cultural identity does not directly determine language ability; rather, it affects learning investment and outcomes through the mediating role of motivation, while intercultural orientation and social context shape the direction and strength of such motivation.

3.2 Multilingual Contexts, Nationalism, and Identity Tensions

Compared with general foreign language learning, Japanese learning among Chinese students often takes place within a multilingual educational environment centered on English. Wang and Zheng, in a multiple-case study of Japanese majors in Chinese universities, show that learners often construct an English self, a Japanese self, and a multilingual self at the same time. The ideal English self is often stronger, whereas Japanese learning is more strongly driven by the ought-to self and practical demands; the study also explicitly points to the

negative impact of English as a global language on Japanese learning [17]. Wang, McConachy, and Ushioda further argue that students learning both English and Japanese experience tensions between an instrumental language and an identity-related language, and must constantly negotiate their learning motivation and identity positions between the social value of different languages and their personal attachments [22]. In addition to multilingual tension, nationalism has become a major topic in recent research. Huang and Feng, through metaphor analysis, find that the motivation of Chinese learners of Japanese changes across stages: lower-year students are more often driven by interest, intermediate learners experience fluctuations due to learning difficulty, and senior learners increasingly focus on practical value [18]. Nomura and Yuan's biographical study of long-term learners suggests that Japanese popular culture often serves as an entry point for sustained motivation, while online communities and intercultural participation further strengthen learners' long-term investment in Japanese culture [19]. Going one step further, Wang, Zhang, and Li distinguish between political nationalism and cultural nationalism, showing that cultural nationalism may enhance Chinese learners' motivation to learn Japanese, whereas political nationalism has a more ambivalent effect and may both promote and suppress motivation [21]. These studies collectively show that Japanese learning among Chinese students does not unfold within a simple interest-based relationship with the language. Rather, it is shaped within a broader social field where English dominance, multilingual competition, nationalist discourse, and intercultural participation intersect to produce identity tensions and motivational structures.

3.3 Cultural Identity Reconstruction and the Measurement of Learning Outcomes in Japanese Learning

In Japanese-specific research, analyses of cultural identity reconstruction mainly come from narrative and case-based studies. Using life-story analysis with former Japanese majors studying in Japan, Ge Xi shows that learning Japanese and studying abroad continuously reshape students' understandings of China, Japan, and themselves; in other words, Japanese learning is not merely an accumulation of ability, but also a process of reconstructing cultural identity and life positioning [20]. de Burgh-Hirabe's study of learners of Japanese in an English-speaking country similarly finds that learners often enter Japanese learning out of curiosity about Japanese culture and communities, but that as learning develops, the ideal Japanese self and positive learning experiences become crucial for sustained investment [23]. Although McEown et al. focus on foreign language learning in Japan rather than Chinese students learning Japanese, their findings likewise suggest that when one language occupies a higher social status, the learning motivation for other languages may be constrained by competition [24]. It should also be noted that although existing studies have revealed the complexity of identity and motivation quite effectively, the measurement of learning outcomes remains relatively weak. Many studies rely on self-perceived proficiency, learning intention, willingness to continue, or adjustment outcomes as substitutes for actual learning achievement [8,12-13], whereas studies incorporating course grades, standardized test scores, oral performance, or long-term proficiency development remain limited. This means that although we can now explain more clearly how cultural identity shapes learners' attitudes and investment, the evidence is still insufficient regarding whether and how such influence is eventually transformed into actual gains in Japanese proficiency. Thus, this body of research highlights both the process of cultural identity reconstruction in Japanese learning and the current weakness of the field in measuring learning outcomes, which remains a major issue for future research.

4. Major Debates, Limitations, and Theoretical Contributions

Taken together, the studies reviewed here show that the field has moved from explaining Japanese learning in terms of interest or instrumentality alone toward a more integrated framework of cultural identity, identity negotiation, social context, and learning motivation. Nevertheless, several limitations remain. First, the concept of cultural identity is defined inconsistently across studies. Some treat it as ethnic identity, others as cultural belonging, national attitude, or intercultural orientation, which makes findings difficult to compare directly [2-4,12,21]. Second, the measurement of learning outcomes is weak. Many studies remain at the level of subjective indicators, making it difficult to determine how identity and motivation affect actual improvement in Japanese proficiency. Third, most studies rely on cross-sectional questionnaires, which are useful for identifying correlations but insufficient for establishing robust causal explanations. By contrast, small-scale qualitative studies can reveal identity change and motivational development in much greater detail, yet they are limited in generalizability [17-20,22]. Finally, although existing research on Chinese students learning

Japanese has paid increasing attention to China-Japan relations, nationalism, the gate-keeping role of English as a global language, and intercultural contact, very few studies place Chinese cultural identity, Japanese cultural identity, learning motivation, and learning outcomes within the same analytical framework. This gap indicates substantial room for theoretical integration. From a theoretical perspective, this review suggests that Japanese learning among Chinese students should be understood as a complex system driven by cultural identity, mediated by learning motivation, and dynamically regulated by multiple social contexts, rather than as a linear process dominated by a single motivational variable. The significance of this theoretical contribution lies in repositioning cultural identity from a peripheral background factor to the starting point of explanation, combining the investment model with motivation theories to account for the pathway of influence, and incorporating multilingual context, nationalism, and educational structure as forms of contextual regulation. In this way, the review offers a clearer integrative framework for future research.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

Overall, research on Chinese students learning Japanese is no longer satisfied with the simple question of why they learn Japanese. Instead, it increasingly seeks to explain how learners negotiate the self amid Chinese cultural identity, Japanese cultural identity, nationalism, the gate-keeping role of English as a global language, classroom experience, and intercultural contact, and how such negotiation gives rise to different forms of learning motivation and learning outcomes. The existing literature consistently shows that the influence of cultural identity on Japanese learning is not unidirectional, static, or linear; rather, it operates through learning motivation, learning experience, and social context. Future research can move forward in at least three directions. First, Chinese cultural identity and Japanese cultural identity should be treated in a more differentiated way, rather than as broad and undivided variables. More attention should be paid to distinctions among national identity, cultural pride, historical memory, cultural interest, and nationalism. Second, more longitudinal and mixed-method studies are needed to track changes in identity, motivation, and learning performance from beginner to advanced stages. Third, future studies should include more objective indicators of learning outcomes, such as course grades, JLPT scores, oral performance, and writing ability, in order to strengthen explanatory power. Through these efforts, future scholarship will be better positioned to explain the mechanisms of cultural identity, learning motivation, and learning outcomes in Japanese learning among Chinese students.

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Conflicts of Interest

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