

# Using Online Comments to Explore General Attitudes towards Learning Mandarin Chinese as a Foreign Language in the UK

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**Abstract** Due to the impact of global English, theoretical research on the motivation of L2 learning in the past few decades has been dominated by studies involving learning English. Questions need to be asked as to what degree those results apply to the situation relating to other languages, especially non-European languages. Different from conventional studies, this explorative study sets out to investigate people's attitudes towards Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in the UK through public comments on a major media platform. Among the findings, the majority of comments are negative about CFL and the integrative/intrinsic dimension is crucial. Language difficulty is not the main reason why people are not studying Chinese as it is widely believed. Among the specific factors, English being the global language is the biggest barrier. Based on this finding, it seems reasonable to argue that, for an emerging regional/ global language like Chinese, more attention should be given to integrative/ intrinsic motivation rather than instrumental benefit. Cultural and social-political factors are also discussed, and suggestions are made for more effective promotion of CFL as well as for other emerging languages.

**Keywords** L2 Motivation, Integrative/ Intrinsic Motivation, Chinese as a Foreign/ Second Language (CFL)

## **1. Introduction**

As the world is becoming increasingly connected

through technological development and ever-growing globalization, the importance of second/ foreign language (L2) learning has been recognised at both government and community levels worldwide. As a result, English, the de facto global lingua franca, is the top language studied in 121 countries (62% of all countries), and it is the second-most popular in an additional eight countries [1]. In the EU, for example, 96 % of pupils in upper secondary general education were studying English as a foreign language. In most EU Member States, more than three fifths of students in general upper secondary education pupils were learning two or more foreign languages in 2019 [2]. However, a clear trend of decline in the number of people learning a foreign language at school has been reported in almost all English-speaking countries. Here are some recent reports: "an overall reduction of 19% in the number of entries for GCSE languages since 2014 in the UK, with both French and German seeing a decline of 30%" [3], "a loss of 651 foreign language programs from 2013 to 2016 in the US" [4], and "the percentage of students studying a foreign language in Year 12 has decreased from 40 percent in 1960 to around 10 per cent in 2016" [5]. Thus, a question that needs to be asked is: what factors are deterring or stopping native English speakers from studying a foreign language?

In recent years, machine translation (MT) has come to the fore to meet the increasing need for international communication. Even though its performance is improving on a daily basis, it is still far from satisfactory, making post-editing a crucial step to avoid unnecessary errors. Before

MT is fully reliable, foreign language learning will continue to play a critical role in cross-culture communication and understanding. As a result, it is not surprising to see major world leaders encouraging foreign language learning with various funding and schemes. However, such efforts are often found to be unsuccessful, such as, the \$62 million National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) in Australia [6]. Therefore, finding out how to motivate people for L2 learning and having that motivation well maintained for a planned L2 learning goal are still at the top of many researchers' agendas, especially for languages other than English (LOTE).

Unfortunately, as has been rightly pointed out by Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie [7], the theoretical research on L2 motivation over the past 25 years has been largely based on the study of English, with over 70% of all empirical investigations focusing on motivation relating to this single language. Both theoretical and practical questions need to be raised as to whether those results are equally applicable to the understanding of motivation to learn LOTEs. It is even more so for native English-speaking people learning non-European languages. Therefore, for emerging L2 candidates, it is more critical to understand how to attract people intrinsically. This study aims to explore public attitudes towards learning Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in the UK as expressed in media comments. It is hoped that the results could provide more input for policy makers as well as language teachers regarding what needs to be done if they want to promote CFL in the UK.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Researching L2 Motivation

Researchers have been trying for a long time to find out what drives people to learn a foreign/ second language. It first started in the 1950s in Canada where some social psychologists studied social factors relating to the two communities speaking English and French. In their pioneering study of 75 high school students from Montreal, Canada, Gardner and Lambert found that, in addition to "linguistic aptitudes", L2 achievement is equally influenced by a "motivational factor" [8] (P. 272). They argued that learners' attitudes towards the target language group will at least partly determine their success in learning the target language. The two concepts used in the study ("integrative orientation" and "instrumental orientation") have since become part of the foundation of L2 motivational studies. According to Gardner and Lambert [8], "integrative orientation" was "where the aim in language study is to learn more about the language group, or to meet more and *different* people; "instrumental," on the other hand, refers to reasons that "reflect the more utilitarian value of linguistic achievement." (p. 271). Following the social educational approach, many scholars

have been trying to explain and describe the multi-faceted nature of L2 motivation in different models and theoretical frameworks [9]-[11].

Integrativeness, a key concept in motivation studies first used by Gardner [12], reflects a genuine interest in learning a second language. It piques people's interest in order to come closer psychologically to the other language community. For example, Gardner and MacIntyre [13] found that both integrative motivation and instrumental motivation facilitated learning, and that instrumentally motivated students studied longer than non-instrumentally motivated students when there was an opportunity to profit from learning, but this distinction disappeared when the incentive was removed.

In a large nationwide survey of 4765 Hungarian school children, Dörnyei and Clement [14] used seven dimensions to investigate motivational characteristics of learning different European languages. Their results have supported the claim that macro-contextual, geopolitical factors significantly affect people's language attitudes and subsequent L2 choices. And 'integrativeness' has been found to be "the uncontested superiority as a predictor of language choice relative to the other motivational scales. It represents "a certain core of the learners' generalized attitudinal/ motivational disposition" (p. 423).

Needless to say, those kinds of studies can help us to better understand how various factors related to language learning and teaching may motivate or demotivate L2 learners. However, it needs to be noted that the participants in those studies often were learners from a language program. Far less attention has been given to what factors might deter people from learning a non-European language or other LOTEs. Even fewer studies have focused on CFL in an English-speaking country.

### 2.2. Motivational/ Demotivational Factors Relating to CFL

Due to the perceived growing economic and political influence of China during the past few decades, L2 Chinese has enjoyed some flourishing growth in many parts of the world. According to Cai [15], there were about 100 countries with more than 2500 universities offering Chinese language courses. It has been estimated that, in 2017, there were about 100 million L2 Chinese learners globally but 60% of them were heritage learners [15]. Tinsley [3] found that fewer primary and secondary school students in England are learning second languages. The problem gets more serious in the final years of secondary education. In the UK, Carruthers [16] warned that the increase in the number of students enrolled at A-level may mask the fact that many of those being examined would be native speakers of Chinese – or those with a family background in the language." Similar trends were also reported in Australia [17].

While L2 learning in schools is heavily affected by policy, curriculum and resources, there is a lack of research

into the factors influencing L2 learning by the public. CFL learners' motivational factors are scarcely researched, and most studies use traditional survey and interview methods within formal language education contexts. Issues investigated often relate to how learners' motivation could influence learning strategy and achievement, or how learners' motivation might change during or after some learning experiences. For example, in Yu [18] study, integrative motivation was found to be a very significant positive factor. However, language anxiety plays a very pronounced negative role in both sociocultural adaptation and academic adaptation. More interestingly, academic adaptation is found to be closely and positively related to sociocultural adaptation. This is largely in line with Dörnyei's [19] claim that the core aspect of integrative disposition lies in identification with the L2 community psychologically and emotionally.

In a survey-plus-interview study of 317 students enrolled in Chinese courses at three American universities, Wen [20] (p. 333) found that positive learning attitudes and experience were the most indicative factors for both the intended learning efforts in the present and the intended continuation of study in the future.

As has been widely accepted, motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic. The former refers to doing something because of one's own interest or enjoyment, while the latter describes doing something due to "external pressures, or rewards" [21] (p. 56). The results of Ren [22] study of secondary school boys in Australia indicate that intrinsic motivations (e.g. a lack of interest in CFL and bad learning experiences) were the major contributing factor for those boys to quit CFL, while extrinsic motivations (like employment opportunities) were the major reasons for the boys to learn CFL. The study also found that family members and CFL teachers were the key influential factors in motivating the boys to choose CSL as an elective course. This finding is much in line with that of [20] which shows that both L2 Chinese heritage and non-heritage learners are strongly influenced by future job prospects (i.e. extrinsic motivation) in addition to other reasons including family heritage, cultural identity, and parental views.

In a study of a group of sixty Australian high school students, Hui [23] examined Australian students' attitudes and motivation toward Chinese language learning in the International Baccalaureate Mandarin program at a high school. A motivation questionnaire was administered at the beginning and end of the semester in order to identify the links between L2 Chinese learning and students' attitudes and motivation. The study found a significant correlation between language study and improved attitudes and motivation among English L1 and beginners. However, such a correlation did not exist among other L1 or advanced learners. In other words, students' background and target language level have an impact on their attitudes towards the target language. In real life, it is not uncommon to see negative attitudes resulting from a poor L2 learning experience. In their interview of students enrolled in the

Chinese language programmes offered by different Confucius Institutes (CI) in the UK, Zhu and Li [24] found students were attracted by different reasons. While school children aged 12-14 said that they wanted to study Chinese because of cultural reasons (kung fu, Taichi, fan dance and Chinese food), their own interests (learning something different, or simply because they were good at languages, or want to talk to their neighbours), more diverse motivations were found among the 14 non-ethnic Chinese tertiary students. Most of the tertiary learners believed that they were effective at language learning. They regarded studying Chinese as a personal challenge, with only one mentioning the cognitive advantage of being bilingual or multilingual. Personal reasons followed, including having a partner or close friend who is Chinese, having Chinese neighbours, and wanting to have a holiday in China. An interesting finding from this study is that the majority of the people interviewed, including local CI staff, managers and partners, do not believe that "Chinese language teaching will create a new cohort of China sympathisers" (p. 330). This is partially in line with some findings in [23].

Since all of these study participants are already enrolled in L2 programmes, it is impossible to figure out why someone would not study a particular language. And for any L2 promotion, it is critical to know the demotivating factors so that practical steps can be taken to make positive changes.

### 2.3. Chinese is a Difficult Language

While some factors can motivate L2 learning, others may cause a decrease at the level of motivation [10]. Among the demotivating factors for CFL, language difficulty has been found to be the biggest barrier for people to choose to learn or to continue learning CFL [25], [26]. Language difficulty level is always relative and even linguists agree that there is no single scale from easy to difficult [27]. According to the American Defence Institute (DLI) ranking, their students are expected to achieve the same level in 26 weeks with a Category 1 language like Spanish while it will take 64 weeks with a Category 4 language like Chinese [28].

Scholars have taken a considerable amount of time to pinpoint the specific areas of difficulty. In a recent review, Spencer [29] listed the areas that L2 Chinese learners have to conquer in addition to all other difficulties commonly faced by all L2 learners. These specific areas cover various differences from morphological to syntactic issues to tonal perception and production.

Among all the issues reported, tone and character learning are the major reasons at the top of everyone's lists. Moser [30], for example, voiced many typical frustrations and challenges facing most L2 Chinese learners. However, the areas most complained about are the writing system and tone. Some of the claims in the article are relevant to individual L2 goal setting and learning approaches that are commonly seen among all L2 learners. Others claims are specific to L2 Chinese learners only. To illustrate his point,

frequent comparisons have been made between a European language (like Spanish or French) and Chinese to show how easy it was for a native English-speaking person to learn an alphabetical language than to learn a logographic language like Chinese. A point easily ignored is that while this is true for someone with an alphabetic language background, it may not be so for those whose L1 is non-alphabetical.

#### 2.4. Social-Political Reasons

The global flourishing and development of CFL could hardly have happened without the strong support of the Confucius Institute (CI). Since the first Confucius Institute was officially opened in South Korea in 2004, it has burgeoned, especially during the last decade or so. There are 541 institutes and nearly 2,000 Confucius classrooms operating in 162 countries at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels [31]. As the Sino-American relationship has worsened in recent years, it has been criticized by many English-speaking countries. As a result of these criticisms, some western governments have been closely scrutinizing the CIs, leading to some of them being shut down. In the US, for example, 27 percent of the CIs were closed down in 2017, with a total of 75 left in the country. Elsewhere, McGuire [32] also noted that “Confucius Institutes have been the main driver of the language’s growth in the western world, but they are tinged with controversy: critics say they lack transparency, suppress academic freedom and act as a propaganda arm of an authoritarian Chinese state.”

A number of widely quoted research studies [33], [34] have pointed to practical challenges, such as financial challenges, academic viability, and relationships with the Chinese partner university. For one reason or another, one area less discussed is, as noted by Alshammari [26], “political and ideological resistance and attitudes towards Chinese and [Chinese] culture” (p. 76). Therefore, it would be interesting to know to what extent this political and ideological resistance exists among the general public towards CFL. This resistance would be reflected in a public arena like media comments.

Research on motivation tends to explore more micro-factors like motivation or learning strategies, which may influence one's attitude towards this language. More attention is needed to how social-political attitudes might influence one's opinion about certain languages and the subsequent L2 choice.

L2 motivation studies often involve using self-report questionnaires and interviews with existing language students. The fact that they have already taken part in certain language programmes may mean that their attitudes toward that language have already been influenced by their learning experiences. This may be either positive or negative. To overcome the ‘distinct bias’, East [35] (p. 506) suggested that active promotion is needed among a wider and more diverse range of learners, especially on how language courses might impact on the attitudes of students who do not necessarily have any ‘buy-in’ to learning that

language. Other scholars also warned that the overreliance on these kinds of techniques could make the findings prone to retrospective rationalization from the participants [36] (p. 236). To get a fuller picture of the issue, more research is needed to find out what those “distinct biases” are in a wider community. As a result, we believe that media comments provide such a window.

#### 2.5. Media Comments as a Snapshot

According to [37] (p. 1), “Online comment sections provide a space for the public to interact with news, to express their opinions, and to learn about others’ views.” With technology development and the use of smart phones increasingly permeating deeper into social life, it has become a standard feature of digital news to allow users to comment on news stories. Comments from the audience are considered the most popular form of public virtual participation and its importance has been recognised by many scholars [38]. News stories without user comments “are becoming rare and starting to look awkward, even suspicious” [37] (p. 97). Therefore, user comments are forming an increasingly inseparable part of the ‘participatory spaces’ in which the unedited online comments “open up a public forum for more informal, spontaneous, and even aggressive and impulsive authorship, most of it by people who hide behind the anonymity of assumed screen names.” [37] (p. 97). This has been well supported in recent research. For example, based on the analysis of a nationally representative sample of commenters and comment readers, Stroud et al [37] reported that 55.0% of Americans have left an online comment and 77.9% have viewed the comments at some point. The research also found that people mostly comment or read comments on domestic politics or policy. The same study also found that many commenters are more interested in brandishing their opinions in the comment section than reading the news themselves.

When researching motivation for L2 Chinese, the majority of studies have been done using questionnaires/surveys involving existing language learners. Public opinion/attitude towards L2 Chinese has not been investigated in depth. Because of their inherent nature, online user comments could provide some information that could have been missing from the kind of research following conventional methodology. The news report on David Cameron’s attitudes towards CFL in the UK is such an opportunity.

### 3. Methodology

This study sets out to explore public language attitudes towards CFL in the UK by analysing users’ comments on a news report published by The Guardian. Following Gardner’s social education model and discourse analysis approach, the study aims to investigate what general attitudes are towards CFL in the UK as expressed in the comments. It also aims to investigate what the major

motivating and demotivating factors are for CFL in the UK. The comments on this particular piece of news report are chosen because it is about learning Mandarin Chinese in the United Kingdom, especially when it is promoted by David Cameron, its then-prime minister. The other reason is that this news report came at a time (2013) when Sino-British relations were in a widely reported “golden era”. It would be interesting to see British people’s attitudes towards learning Mandarin Chinese during this particular time.

This explorative study attempts to move the focus from the traditional classroom environment to the general public space. We hope the results could provide some different perspectives regarding CFL in the UK and beyond, particularly in English speaking regions and countries. Considering their high level of anonymity, original usernames were sometimes used in direct citations.

### 3.1. Data Collection and Analysis

The news report explored in this study was published in The Guardian on December 5, 2013, entitled “David Cameron urges British students to ditch French and learn Mandarin”. Comments in this study include all comments on the news report and replies to the comments. Apart from those comments that have been removed by the website’s moderator because they did not abide by community standards, a total of 247 comments were recorded from 5 Dec. 2013 00:01 GMT to 8 Dec. 2013 1:50. The Guardian is a major British daily newspaper. We assume the comments are representative of local opinions based on the local nature of the topic. The comments cover a wide range of opinions regarding CFL in the UK.

The comments were coded and then thematically analysed on Nvivo. The data were coded first for Positive (= support CFL in the UK) vs Negative (Do not support CFL in the UK) as this provided a general picture of the comments. Comments without explicit attitudes were coded as irrelevant if they were:

- Made by those who identify themselves as Chinese or whose username sounds Chinese, for example, JohnHu, alfredwong, ZhuangWenBin, PuWeiTa.
- Swear words or personal attacks.
- Comments on technical difficulties of learning languages other than Chinese, quotes, argument about different matters, or any comments without clear indication of attitudes, for example:

*“French are massively annoyed by Chinese speaking to them in English.”*

*“I didn’t say that did I? I forgot that if the Guardian says it, then it must be true! ☺”*

The second layer of coding was performed using an adapted version of the [40] model. Based on the nature of the data collected and the literature, Dornyei’s [39] Dimensions 4 (Self-concept) and 5 (Goal-related) were

combined as one. Comments that supported learning foreign languages in general but did not express explicit language preference were coded as Mixed. This was labelled as a separate category because some of them were positive about L2 learning in general but their L2 did not appear to be Chinese. The six dimensions investigated in this study were the following:

1. Affective/integrative dimension: refers to a general affective "core" of the L2 motivation complex related to attitudes, beliefs and values associated with the process, the target and the outcome of learning, including variables such as "integrativeness," "affective motive," "language attitudes," "intrinsic motivation," "enjoyment" and "interest;"
2. Instrumental/pragmatic dimension: refers to extrinsic, largely utilitarian factors such as financial benefits;
3. Macro-context-related dimension: refers to broad, societal and sociocultural factors such as multicultural, intergroup and ethnolinguistic relations;
4. Self-concept and goal related dimension: refers to learner-specific variables such as self-confidence, self-esteem, anxiety and need for achievement; various goal characteristics;
5. Educational context-related dimension: refers to the characteristics and appraisal of the immediate learning environment (i.e., classroom) and the school context; *teachers, materials, teaching methods, policy, curriculum, funding*
6. Significant others-related dimension: refers to the motivational influence of parents, family, and friends.

## 4. Results and Discussions

Table 1 presents the results of first layer coding. Among the 247 comments, 106 were excluded from the analysis as they were irrelevant according to the criteria above. There were 98 comments containing negative attitudes towards CFL in the UK while only 32 comments expressed positive attitudes. This result is not surprising considering the overall number of people learning L2 Chinese in the UK is very low. Although these two categories (N=98+32) only account for 52.6% of the total comments, we believe the opinions and ideas expressed in the 7800 or so words are extremely valuable and worth close investigation.

**Table 1.** Overall results of general attitude

Comments categories	Number
Negative	98
Positive	32
Mixed	12
Irrelevant	106
Total comments	247

There are 12 comments with mixed attitudes. This means those comments recognise the benefit of foreign language learning in general but they believe Mandarin Chinese should not be the only choice.

Among the 130 valid comments, which were contributed by 103 people, 75.4% (N=98) of them were negative while just a quarter of the comments were positive. Most of the people made one comment with eight people making multiple valid comments (see Table 2). Multiple comments from the same person could be posted consecutively discussing a specific point. However, they could come back later either responding to other comments or commenting on other people's posts on a different thread.

When making multiple comments, the commenters were largely consistent in their attitudes with only two exceptions. From Table 2, we can see that commenter AenimaUK contributed about 27.5% of the total positive comments. In other words, AenimaUK is a heavy contributor to positive comments. This commenter's only negative comment is not specifically about CFL, but in general about teachers' working conditions and education policy. The true inconsistent commenter "peterh" is a fascinating example and will be discussed later.

**Table 2.** Multiple comments and their commenters

Commenter	Positive	Negative
AenimaUK	8	1
peterh	1	4

newthought		4
sugarhead		4
cheveguara	4	
shanger	3	
Nina1414		2
Ladnajest		2
Total	16	17

Table 3 presents the break-down of the reasons for both positive and negative comments.

#### 4.1. Integrative/Intrinsic Motivation

The integrative/intrinsic dimension was the most commented area accounting for 77.7% (N=98) of the total 126 valid comments. While comments on this dimension account for 71.8% (23 out of 32) of the positive comments, it accounts for 79.8% (75 out of 94) of the negative comments. This is understandable given that integrative/intrinsic motivation is the most powerful drive for L2 learning. Since affective /integrative is a very broad dimension including so many variables, it would be interesting to examine the specific areas that attract negative comments.

Table 4 lists the top 4 areas causing positive and negative comments which will be discussed one by one in the following.

**Table 3.** Attitudes towards CFL in the UK

General Attitudes	Integrative/ Intrinsic	Education context	Macro/ Social	Instrumental/ Extrinsic	Self-concept/ Goal	Family/ friend
Positive	23	1	4	2	1	1
Negative	75	12	3	2	2	0
Sub-total	98	13	7	4	3	1
Total	126					

**Table 4.** Major areas of negative comments

Comments	Areas			
	English is the global language	Chinese is too difficult	Political system and government	Other integrative comments
Negative comments	18	17	13	12

At the top of the list are 18 comments (from 16 commenters) believing that there is no need to study Chinese because English is and will be the only global language for a long time. Here are some typical examples.

MansonInNY: *"And 'many people' are learning many languages, yet one remains the only true lingua franca in the world: English. Mandarin will not catch up to English as a world language, not soon anyway."*

Bartlomeo: *"Luckily for us, the Chinese learn English. English is and will continue to be the language of business."*

RedonBlue: *"The language of the 21st Century technological age is English and all western languages are written in the Greek/Roman script....not Mandarin."*

Hunboy1225: *"Mandarin will never be the 'tongue of the future', let alone have any influence in world business or diplomacy."*

Kerryflote: *"What is the point? In China anyone who can is learning English."*

It is not surprising that a global language will be the first choice for many L2 learners. For a native speaker of that global language, deciding which L2 to start with will be a difficult task, or whether they should start with one at all. In terms of pure numbers, no other language could even come close to English. This is because the combined number of L1 and L2 English speakers has been increasing so fast that even scholars have been struggling to revise their predictions. David Crystal, for example, raised his 1997 estimate of 1,259 million to 1500 million in 2003. And in 2008, the number reached 2 billion. Within 25 years, the English-speaking population increased from a fifth to a third of the world's population [40].

As for the number of L1 Mandarin Chinese speakers, 904 million people in China spoke some variety of Mandarin as their first language in 2017 [41]. As for L2 Chinese, there were about 100 million learners of Chinese globally in 2017, and 60 million of them were overseas heritage learners [15]. Although L2 Chinese learner numbers have enjoyed an explosive increase during recent years in many countries around the world, there is still a long way to go for CFL. This is not only in terms of sheer numbers but also in the number of countries where L1 and L2 Chinese are spoken.

Based on the fast spread of CFL, Gil [42] has proposed three scenarios in which Chinese could replace English as a global language: co-exist with English or one where English will continue to be the global language. Gil believes that the primary attraction of CFL is China's political importance and economy. However, the making of English as a true global language is closely related to the United States' leading economic, political, military, scientific and cultural power during the past 70 years. Whether Chinese will replace or co-exist with English as one of the global languages largely depends on how China will catch up in areas other than economics and politics.

The situation may vary in non-English speaking regions. Liddicoat and Kirkpatrick [43], for example, have identified three trends in language education policies among Asian countries. L2 Chinese may have a chance to become a regional language in some of those countries. Therefore, for L2 learners, especially native English speakers, they have to ask themselves about their goals and own motivations before making a decision [44].

However, what the public may not realise is, as has been rightly pointed out by scholars, that "why a language becomes a global language has little to do with the number of people who speak it. It has much more to do with who those speakers are." [45] (p. 5). It does not have much to do with structural properties or the size of the vocabulary of the language either. Examples in human history have clearly shown that the fundamental reason for a language to become a global lingua franca is "the political power of its people – especially their military power" (p. 7). If Chinese is to become a candidate language for the global community, co-existing with or in whatever form, it will at least set itself apart from those which were established by military conquest and subsequent colonization.

#### 4.2. Instrumental/ Extrinsic Motivation

It needs to be noted that only 6.3% (n=8) of the total valid comments were made on instrumental/extrinsic motivation. There has been no mention of its benefits in terms of employment or job opportunity. Many comments, on the contrary, have challenged the idea of learning a L2 to seal a business deal. In other words, instrumental/extrinsic benefit is not the main drive for their L2 learning. And it is reasonable to believe that most of the commenters are not school students. Therefore, a critical question needs to be asked if instrumental/ extrinsic motivations like job opportunity have been overstated in the past. If this finding is read together with [13] observation that "instrumentally motivated students studied longer than non-instrumentally motivated students when there was an opportunity to profit from learning, but this distinction disappeared when the incentive was removed (p. 57), it seems to suggest that the short-lived incentive motivation has to be toned down to avoid a disillusionment later. This means that serious attention is needed for a shift of focus from instrumental/ extrinsic motivation to integrative/ intrinsic motivation. This is particularly pertinent when promoting emerging L2s like Chinese.

#### 4.3. Language Difficulty Level

Within the Integrative/Intrinsic dimension, language difficulty comes second with 17 entries (from 15 commenters) accounting for 18.2% of the total negative comments. This result is slightly lower than expected, considering the high frequency and popularity of the issues reported in the media and academic research. These comments often express the view that British people are

poor at language learning. They would not get anywhere with L2 Chinese since they could not even manage an alphabetical language like Spanish or French.

MasonInNY: "... but learning foreign languages is a chore. And French is much easier than Mandarin."

Jaerven: "English people should never attempt it whatever language they speak, we lack the requisite DNA."

nina1414: "If pupils think German is hard, then what hope do they have with Chinese?"

It is worth noting that only five people mentioned tone or character learning as specific challenging areas based on their L2 Chinese learning experiences. The other 10 people's comments were based on their beliefs. One commenter uploaded a long text in both French and English trying to show the musical aspect of alphabetical languages that Chinese does not possess. This comment was immediately challenged by two other comments.

Interestingly, there were 10 comments (from 9 people) that did not agree that Chinese was a difficult language. Compared with the negative comments, all positive comments were based on personal learning experiences. Some were general comments while others commented on specific aspects of L2 Chinese learning. Commenter 'peterh', who had posted multiple negative comments about CFL, believed that L2 Chinese was not that difficult, and it was more interesting than French. Although the grammar in the original Chinese comment is not flawless, the fact of using the target language to make comments shows the confidence and strategy of an efficient L2 learner. A closer look at the negative comments from this person shows that what this person was really against was making CFL the only choice in the UK.

Three people discussed the writing system/character learning in four comments. Here is one from 'SR400':

"...sure, the characters will be a challenge, but all the characters are constructed from a base of about 200 "radicals", so once they are learned, the writing part gets easier."

For this individual, character learning is challenging but it is manageable with the right learning approach. Commenter '250022', on the other hand, admitted that writing is very challenging after pointing out some of the features that could make L2 Chinese easier to learn:

250022: "Actually, to learn to speak mandarin isn't too difficult. There are no tenses, genders or possessives. The tones can be a bit of a hurdle but most of the language is contextual. i.e. there are four tones in Mandarin but 151 uses of the word 'yi.' It's the writing that's a nightmare."

User 'AenimaUK' was the most active commenter on this news item and contributed 9 entries on different aspects of L2 Chinese. In one of the longest comments, this user shared his/her view on the difficulty of reading Chinese

classic works:

"I learnt contemporary Chinese purely in daily life over a few years with basically no classes... The classic works are all available in simplified characters, thus the only real problem is classical grammar ... It does often take some interpretative work, but this is equally true for modern Chinese readers..."

"As ancient Chinese is slightly more difficult for modern Chinese to read, they tend to exaggerate and assume it must be impossible for foreigners. It isn't. With a fairly limited reading vocabulary, you could pick up a bilingual English-Chinese edition of Mencius and after a short period of study be able to basically read the original Chinese directly by yourself. That's how I did it."

It is surprising that opinions on aspects of their L2 could be so diverse even among highly advanced learners. Where classical Chinese was claimed to be "deliberately impossible" in [31] (p. 66), the problem could be solved with the help of various digital resources and tools widely available, online or offline. Fast technological development has provided many opportunities for both L2 learners and teachers. Therefore, when properly trained and equipped with those technologies, the traditionally perceived 'impossible' may become 'possible' or even 'easily manageable' for motivated L2 learners.

Two comments were made specifically on tone with some tips on learning tone:

Curdle: "The difference being that Chinese speakers will generally anticipate the context in which you speak, so even if your tonal variant is out. They will invariably make an effort to understand where you are coming from. They are used to this because of the various regional dialects. I have to say that I find the French far less helpful as a general rule."

Cheveguara: "Yes, very much so, just let it out and don't worry too much about tones. Chinese generally get your drift, congratulate you on speaking great Chinese, then correct you! Very helpful and encouraging."

A positive integrative attitude towards the L2 community could be felt in these comments. This is in line with most research results. Positive affective attitudes towards the target language and community often lead to more efficient learning strategies for L2 learners [13], [40].

One commenter shared his/her experiences of naturally acquiring the target language in an immersion environment:

Cheveguara: "You obviously don't get out a lot or spend much time with Chinese people. I went to China in 1986 not speaking a word of Mandarin but three months later I could actually get by in it. Not much study- just listening to Chinese people that's all."

As observed in [30] (p. 33): "Mandarin Chinese is an extremely complicated language with an ever-growing



presence in the world. However, second language learners of Mandarin Chinese must contend with numerous difficulties on the journey to second language acquisition. Firstly, like learners of all foreign languages they must deal with general issues regarding second language acquisition (SLA), such as stress, anxiety, different task types, speed related difficulties, vocabulary retention, and various other problems. Secondly, L2 Chinese learners also have to deal with many issues specific to Chinese. These include the morphological differences between Chinese and other languages, acquisition of tones, and the complexity of the Chinese writing system.”

#### 4.4. Social-Political Ideology

There were 15 negative comments relating to government and political ideology. A few of them contained a direct comment of their own or supported a previous comment containing unfavorable attitudes towards CFL in the UK. The specific aspects of this category include an imagined collapse of China’s economy, human rights, uncomfortable feelings about the handover of Hong Kong, the UK’s policy towards China, Tibet, assumed internal stresses in China, and a tyrannical government. This result should not be surprising considering the amount of criticism and negative reports frequently covered in the mainstream media in the West. The situation is unlikely to change any time soon given the dominance of Western media around the world.

Compared with the dominating dimensions and variables discussed above, the other four dimensions (instrumental/extrinsic, self-concept/goal, macro social context, and family and friends) only attracted 7 negative comments in total. This is quite different from the commonly reported results claiming instrumental/extrinsic motivation being the most significant motivation for learning L2 Chinese. Here, instrumental/extrinsic motivation refers to more employment opportunities or other financial benefits. When comparing this result with those from studies that mainly involve school learners, we need to bear in mind that school students’ language attitudes and their subsequent language L2 choice are more prone to the influence of their immediate environment like school and family whereas commenters of this study are presumably adults whose attitudes would reflect influence and experiences from a much wider society. This result seems to suggest that the primary reasons stopping UK people from studying L2 Chinese are not quite related to instrumental/extrinsic, self-concept, or macro social contexts.

#### 4.5. Cultural and History

A few comments came from cultural perspectives. These were based on personal experiences, some sort of moral ground, or regional customs and practices long abandoned

by the majority of China. Here are some examples.

*“Yes folks. Learn Mandarin badly and get ripped off by the Chinese.”*

*“And we Europeans would certainly be morally better off without your nation of shopkeepers.”*

*“Jeez, what’s up with people, just because an otherwise backward culture suddenly come in to a bit of money, we should start learning their language !... How about eating our favourite pets, after all dogs have medicinal properties according to Chinese medicine.”*

To attract L2 learners, intrinsic/integrative factors are essential. If well maintained, they can guarantee satisfactory achievement, particularly when combined with other motivational factors. Without a desire to integrate into the target culture, it is hard to imagine a L2 learning journey lasting long or yielding significant achievement. As observed in [46], while English language skills are increasingly becoming universal basic skills, monolingual and even bilingual English speakers may steadily lose out to their multilingual competitors (pp. 118-119). Therefore, it would be more common to see people wanting to seek a change of identity through L2 learning. With some form of identification with the target culture, L2 learners could realize an ideal linguistic self as well as a social self [47]. In other words, L2 learning becomes a tool for realising their imagined social identity rather than materialistic gains like a scholarship, a business deal or a job opportunity. This echoes the recent report that “although motivation for language learning in Year 9 is high, almost all pupils do not see the potential for languages to be a part of their future careers [48] (p. 8). Therefore, more attention is needed to a shift in focus of L2 learning to meet the changing needs of a fast-developing society.

#### 4.6. Mixed Attitudes

There are 12 comments with mixed attitudes. They were listed under this category because the attitudes expressed in them are more than just negative or positive towards CFL or any language. All comments in this category support foreign language learning but suggest that L2 choices should not be limited only to Chinese or any specific language. Learners themselves should have the right to choose which language to study. This reflects the democratic tradition in Western countries. More importantly, a few commenters pointed out that it should not be a binary or zero-sum question. Rather, it is possible to study two languages at the same time. A few comments also said that studying a foreign language just to seal a business deal is an unwise idea. See some typical examples below.

*“This simplistic, facile idea of ‘X is more useful than Y’ will get us nowhere.”*

*“Mandarin is difficult. Spanish is rather easy. But*

*Cameron is right. Learning foreign languages is the way to go. Communication is the key."*

*"How about letting people choose for themselves rather than imposing one rule on the entire population?"*

*"Repeat after me: the more you learn, the easier it gets. You would know it, if you could actually speak a foreign language."*

*"We have 3 of the G8 economies on our doorstep in Germany, France and Italy. I don't think we should be dropping those languages; we should be teaching Mandarin alongside them."*

A mixed attitude could not be explained better in the following comment:

*"Personally, the economic benefits of learning a language are a poor motivator. Learning Chinese or more specifically Mandarin Chinese will not be a guarantee for anything later in life. However, it does open up the annals of Chinese culture, classical and contemporary, probably for those who would have been motivated by this in the first place."*

## 5. Conclusions

Due to the ever-growing number of people learning English, theoretical research on L2 learning motivation in the past few decades has been dominated by studies involving learning English. A question that needs to be asked is to what degree those results are applicable to the situation relating to the learning of LOTE. Far less attention has been given to non-European languages. Different from conventional studies which often involve participants in an education context, this explorative study sets out to investigate people's attitudes towards CFL in the UK through public comments on a major media platform. The analysis is based on comments made in a news report. This is when then UK Prime Minister David Cameron was calling for more UK children to learn Mandarin Chinese instead of traditional choices like French, Spanish or German.

The results of the study suggest that the biggest challenge to promote CFL in the UK is integrative/intrinsic factors. In the opinion that integrative motivation is unquestionably superior to other motivational scales [14], it is evident that L2 Chinese has not shown that same strong attraction, as 75.4% of comments were negative. This means the majority of commenters were unwilling to engage, communicate or integrate with the target L2 community, let alone to become a member of that community. The difficulty level of the language, the tonal aspect, or the writing system are not the biggest obstacles to learning Chinese. A number of problems mentioned in the negative comments were addressed by other commenters by providing some solutions to those difficulties. This seems to support, at least partially, the

popular saying that any properly motivated learner can learn a second language and achieve the ultimate goal of 'multi-competence' advocated in [47].

Ideological and cultural reasons were the main reasons mentioned in the negative comments. These are the areas that reflect one's general feelings towards the culture and people of the target language. The overwhelming discussion of ideological issues in Western media makes it not surprising that some comments express a sense of cultural superiority. This is understandable because China is still a developing country despite a few decades of rapid development. It is not easy to change the image and impression that have prevailed for over two hundred years. The situation may not change easily considering the benefits enjoyed by traditional global languages, particularly the dominance of Western, especially English media, where cultural differences have often been politicised. It is vital for non-European L2s like Chinese to shift their focus from extrinsic/instrumental motivation to intrinsic/integrative motivation. More attention is needed for how to teach Chinese culture, together with language teaching or separately, in a way that is more acceptable to people of different cultural backgrounds.

This also echoes [47]'s argument for promoting a less instrumentalist and more holistic view of language learning. It is especially true for native English-speaking people when English is increasingly becoming a "near—universal basic skill" as observed in [46] (p. 118). The promising sign is that, with China's improved status in the world, CFL, together with many other choices, is quickly becoming an L2 choice for more and more people around the world. Therefore, with the expected arrival of the "multilingual turn" and growing awareness of 'ideal selves' among L2 learners [47], more attention is needed to the broader and intangible benefits of expanding one's intellectual experience including helping students to develop a sense of being world citizens [49]. Like [33]'s conclusion for CFL: "Although Chinese is currently at about fifth or sixth in the language rankings of most European countries, and there are many technical and institutional obstacles to its progress, it would be foolish to underestimate its potential."

As with any methodology, this line of research has its own limitations. First, because the data was collected on an online platform, it remains a question to what degree the results could represent the general population. This is particularly true for those who are not actively online, or those who could not voice their opinion due to technical reasons. For the same reason, data collection is a challenge because of the nature of the news report, especially when spontaneity is paramount. In spite of the limitations, we think this is an effective way to gain insights into people's attitudes and beliefs, as it has fewer restrictions than traditional research methods. If similar research could be carried out in different countries with different cultural and language backgrounds, it would be interesting to see how those attitudes towards CFL might differ across countries,

and to what degree it is reflected in the number of people learning the language. It is our hope that studies of this kind could contribute to a deeper understanding of the issues so CFL could be promoted more effectively. This would enable CFL to meet the constantly changing needs of potential learners.

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