

# A Study on the Approach to Motivation Enhancement for Chinese Learning in Rwanda from the Perspective of Cultural Field

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**Abstract:** With the deepening of Sino-Rwandan relations, the field of Chinese language use in Rwanda has gradually expanded. However, studies show that Rwandan students face a lack of motivation in learning Chinese. This study, based on Bourdieu's theory of cultural fields and a theoretical framework concerning learner self-perception in second language acquisition, identifies key factors influencing Chinese language education practice, including capital, habitus, teachers, students, and educational practices. The study proposes corresponding strategies to enhance student motivation, which are summarized in five key areas: teacher competence, teaching content, teaching methods, students' career development, and their perceptions of China or the Chinese language. By implementing these multidimensional strategies, it is possible to effectively enhance the motivation of Rwandan students in learning Chinese and contribute to the continued strengthening of Sino-Rwandan cooperation.

**Keywords:** Cultural field; Rwanda; Chinese learning; Motivation enhancement

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## 1. Research background

With the deepening of Sino-African relations, Rwanda and China have forged increasingly close cooperation in politics, economics, and culture. As President Kagame noted during the 2024 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation in Beijing, “Belt and Road cooperation has played an important role in improving infrastructure and promoting sustainable development in Rwanda,” highlighting that China has become one of Rwanda's largest trading partners, with expanding collaboration in agriculture, green development, and digitalization <sup>[1]</sup>. In the cultural sphere, partnerships such as Confucius Institutes have played a central role in promoting Chinese language education and vocational training, offering young Rwandans broader development opportunities. The same forum also marked a diplomatic milestone by elevating bilateral ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership, with renewed emphasis on educational and cultural cooperation.

Against this backdrop, demand for Chinese language learning in Rwanda has grown rapidly, driven by both instrumental motivations (e.g., employment) and integrative ones (e.g., cultural interest). However, challenges such as low motivation and identity conflicts persist.

This study draws on Bourdieu's “cultural field” theory and the concept of the learner's ideal future self to investigate

motivational factors. Research shows that while many Rwandan students initially learn Chinese out of cultural interest or due to career goals, motivation often declines over time due to language difficulty and limited achievement <sup>[2, 3]</sup>.

From the perspective of the cultural field, motivation stems from both internal identity formation and external conditions, including teacher competence, curriculum, pedagogy, career outlook, and perceptions of China. External opportunities provide extrinsic motivation, while constructing an “ideal Chinese-speaking self” nurtures intrinsic motivation. This dual dynamic highlights the need for optimized teaching strategies to sustain learner engagement.

## **2. Theoretical foundation**

### **2.1. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural field**

According to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, all cultural activities have their own potential models. Inspired by Cahill’s relational way of thinking, Bourdieu proposed the concept of field and defined it as “a network or pattern of objective relations between different positions”. Positions are objectively defined based on the power (also capital) with which they profit from the field <sup>[4]</sup>.

One of the advantages of Bourdieu’s sociological theory of field lies in its structuralist and relational methodological foundation, on the one hand, on which he seeks to transcend sociology’s long-entrenched dichotomy. On the other hand, in terms of its instructive nature for practice, Bourdieu’s field theory is able to connect the various subjects in society. In a lecture at the University of California, San Diego, in March 1986, Bourdieu introduced his ideas to an American audience accustomed to academic labels by describing himself as a constructivist structuralist, while at the same time not forgetting to add that he was also a structuralist constructivist. Constructivism refers to the socio-generative process of taking into account actors’ patterns of perception, thought and action in social analyses, as well as the generative process of social structure, that is, the generative process of habitus and field, which Bourdieu repeatedly emphasized <sup>[5]</sup>.

#### **2.1.1. Field-Capital-Habitus**

The focal point in Bourdieu’s sociological theoretical system is the concept of field, which he defines as “a system that expresses relationships” and “a special network reflecting the objective relationships between various positions” <sup>[6]</sup>. As a subset of the social field, the cultural field encompasses values, cognitive styles, and behavioural habits, shaping how individuals act and communicate within it.

Capital, in Bourdieu’s theory, refers to generative resources accumulated in various forms—cultural, economic, symbolic, and social. He emphasizes that “a capital is always apt and effective in the given specific field... enabling its owner to exert power over others... and to be seen as a real force” <sup>[6]</sup>.

Habitus is the internalized disposition shaped by past and present environments, forming systematic behavioral tendencies. It reflects a “habitual state of an actor... influenced by the past and present environments... systematically ordered rather than randomly disordered” <sup>[7]</sup>. Each actor thus carries the habitus unique to their cultural field.

## **3. The approach to motivation enhancement**

Building on the theoretical framework in Chapter 2, this chapter applies Bourdieu’s concepts, field, capital, and habitus, to analyze the concrete factors influencing Chinese learning motivation in Rwanda. Specifically, the five key elements discussed below can be understood as practical manifestations of how cultural capital circulates and habitus forms within the educational field. Based on Bourdieu’s framework, five key factors influencing Chinese learning in the Rwandan cultural field emerge from the interplay between capital, habitus, and the roles of teachers and students: teacher competence, teaching content, methodology, career development, and perceptions of China.

### **3.1. Enhancement of teachers' competence**

In Bourdieu's sociological theory, the significance of education is not limited to the impartation of knowledge, the development of abilities, and the molding of personality. Education, like an "immense cognitive machine", is the most critical part of the process of cultural reproduction and social reproduction<sup>[8]</sup>. The pedagogic work of the educator leads to the formation of specific habits in the educated person. Teachers, as educators, play a leading role in educational practice, so improving teachers' competence can effectively enhance students' motivation. In addition to their duty as educators, teachers of Chinese to speakers of other languages are also representatives of China, disseminators of Chinese culture, and maintainers of Sino-foreign friendship. Therefore, their political, cultural, and professional competence are particularly important for enhancing students' motivation to learn Chinese.

#### **3.1.1. Political competence**

Enhancing teachers' political competence can help improve Rwandan students' motivation to learn Chinese, especially their political awareness and political knowledge.

In terms of political awareness and knowledge, teachers should recognize the link between their professional role and broader global development, guiding students to connect Chinese learning with China–Rwanda cooperation and personal growth. Familiarity with relevant policies and political concepts—such as China's "community of human destiny"—enables teachers to foster students' understanding of China and strengthen their motivation through a sense of shared vision and opportunity.

#### **3.1.2. Cultural competence**

In the multicultural context of teaching and learning activities, cultural fields exhibit significant compounding and nesting characteristics, which means that international Chinese language teachers' teaching practices need to be carried out in a multilayered cultural environment. In addition to understanding and integrating the field habitus of Chinese culture, teachers need to be cross-culturally sensitive to understand and respect the subcultures of their students, especially those that are deeply influenced by Rwandan local customs.

#### **3.1.3. Professional competence**

In terms of teaching methods, teachers should actively explore and adopt diversified teaching strategies in their educational practices to accurately meet the learning characteristics and needs of Rwandan students. Through the use of teaching methods such as scenario simulation and interactive games, teachers can stimulate students' intrinsic interest in learning and make the process of Chinese language learning more attractive and effective. This student-centered approach not only helps to strengthen students' language practice skills but also effectively enhances their self-efficacy and builds up positive attitudes towards Chinese language learning. In this positive teaching environment, students can be more actively involved in the learning process and develop a lasting and stable learning drive.

### **3.2. Adaptation of teaching content**

Teaching content should avoid overt imposition and align with local norms. There are two main ways to achieve this goal. One is to reduce or even get rid of heterogeneity, so that Chinese ideology and culture can influence and infect Rwandan students at an implicit level, rather than explicitly indoctrinating the ideology and culture. The other is to choose content that can present China's modernization achievements or meet the interests or practical needs of the Rwandan people, when it is necessary for Chinese ideology and culture to be in the teaching contents in an explicit way.

#### **3.2.1. Remove heterogeneous traits**

When arranging teaching content, topics with strong Chinese characteristics are minimized in favor of local Rwandan themes or shared human concerns such as food production and science. Although students may not directly study Chinese

ideology, cultural ideas are still “present” invisibly embedded in characters, syntax, and the teacher’s behavior. This subtle integration often proves more effective than explicit instruction, as it reduces cultural resistance and enhances students’ motivation to learn, while promoting Chinese culture more naturally.

### 3.3. Guidance of career development

In addition to classroom strategies, long-term motivation is also shaped by students perceived future returns from language learning, particularly in career development. Cultural capital refers to “cultural goods transmitted through various educational actions”, such as knowledge, skills, and taste acquired via education or family background. It exists in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized, and is continually accumulated through education and social practice, influencing one’s social standing and career development <sup>[9]</sup>.

For Rwandan students, learning Chinese is not merely linguistic training, but also a means of accumulating cultural capital through language proficiency (embodied), understanding of Chinese society and culture (objectified), and certifications like HSK (institutionalized) <sup>[10]</sup>. This accumulation enhances their competitiveness in both China-Rwanda cooperation and the global job market. As students begin to see language learning as a path to broader career opportunities, their motivation increases <sup>[11]</sup>. According to the Ideal Self Theory, “the higher the perceived feasibility of achieving a goal, the higher the value attributed to that goal”.

## 4. Conclusion

As China–Rwanda relations continue to deepen, the role of the Chinese language in Rwanda has expanded, opening up new possibilities for cultural and educational collaboration. However, a persistent challenge remains: many students struggle to maintain sufficient motivation in learning Chinese. Grounded in Bourdieu’s theory of cultural fields and the concept of the learner’s envisioned future self, this study identifies five key factors that shape learner motivation: teacher competence, curriculum content, instructional methods, career aspirations, and perceptions of China <sup>[12]</sup>.

The strategies proposed in this study offer practical guidance for enhancing motivation and ensuring the long-term sustainability of Chinese language education in Rwanda. By aligning pedagogical approaches with students’ personal goals and cultural backgrounds, this research not only strengthens the foundation for meaningful language acquisition but also contributes to deeper and more equitable China–Rwanda cooperation through language and cultural exchange. Furthermore, this study offers a replicable framework for analyzing language motivation in other cross-cultural contexts where language learning intersects with geopolitical and socio-economic dynamics.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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