

Why Japanese? Why Not Japanese? A Case Study of Chinese International Students Studying Japanese at American Universities

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ABSTRACT

As Chinese students have become a larger share of the international student population at U.S. universities, their participation in Japanese language classes has increased. However, Chinese student enrollment significantly decreases after the completion of the first Japanese class, and consequently, fewer Chinese students take intermediate or advanced level classes. This study examined the experiences of Chinese international students enrolled in Japanese classes as well as those who stopped taking Japanese after the first quarter or first-year class in a private university in the United States. We used semistructured interviews to investigate the reasons and goals of Chinese international students for studying the Japanese language, the successes or challenges both inside and outside of the Japanese classroom, and the reasons students continue or discontinue learning Japanese.

Keywords: Chinese international students, higher education, Japanese, motivation

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the number of Chinese international students in U.S. universities has dramatically increased. According to the 2018 *Open Doors Report*, the number of Chinese international students in the United States in the 2017–2018 academic year reached 363,341, which accounts for 33.2% of international students in U.S. universities (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2018). Over the past 2 decades, Chinese international students' enrollment in undergraduate programs has increased. In 2001, only 8,252 Chinese international students were in undergraduate programs,

while the number has now significantly increased to 148,593, almost 18 times the number in 2001 (IIE, 2018). This dramatic increase has brought changes to various aspects of U.S. universities, including Japanese language programs.

The rapid increase of Chinese international students appears to partially contribute to the increase in the enrollment of Japanese programs. Mori and Takeuchi (2016) reported that the percentage of international students in the Japanese programs of nine large public universities located in Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, ranged from approximately 25% to 65% and averaged 45%. In one of those universities, almost half of undergraduates who enrolled in Japanese language courses were international students from Asia, the majority of whom were Chinese.

Despite the substantial number of Chinese international students enrolled in Japanese classes across universities in the United States, this group receives little attention regarding their reasons and motivations for learning Japanese. This is particularly so considering that international students are not required to complete any foreign language requirement. Further, there is minimal exploration regarding Chinese international students in the Japanese classroom.

Using semistructured interviews, this study investigated Chinese international students' reasons and goals for studying Japanese, both in and out of the Japanese classroom experience, and reasons to continue or discontinue studying Japanese. This study offers new insights into understanding the learning experience of Chinese international students in universities in the United States and highlights vital considerations in recruiting, retaining, and teaching foreign languages to international students. The findings also make an essential contribution to the field of study of language learning motivation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese International Students in the United States

The United States is one of the most popular study abroad countries for Chinese international students. Earning a diploma in a country like the United States is considered beneficial in obtaining a better job as well as improving social status (Griner & Sobol, 2014; Hao, 2018; Sánchez et al., 2006; Yan & Berliner, 2011, 2013; Yi, 2001; Zhang, 2000).

Since China and the United States agreed to exchange students and scholars in 1978, the number of Chinese students in U.S. universities has increased significantly. In the academic year of 1980–1981, fewer than 1,000 Chinese students studied in limited institutions, while more than 360,000 Chinese students enrolled in U.S. institutions in the academic year of 2017–2018 (IIE, 2018; Yan & Berliner, 2011).

Regarding the process of Chinese international students deciding to study abroad, parents and peers play an essential role in deciding where to study abroad (Deutsch, 2004; Griner & Sobol, 2014; Hao, 2018; Rafi, 2018; Yi, 2001). After arriving at universities in the United States, they face academic, sociocultural, and personal challenges (Hao, 2018; Heng, 2017, 2018; Yan & Berliner, 2011). The most significant concern for most Chinese international students is academic success. Yan

and Berliner (2011) found that Chinese international students devote most of their time to schoolwork. As a result, they have little time for other interests and recreation. Further, Chinese international students tend to interact mostly with co-nationals due to the cultural differences between China and the United States (Hao, 2018; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Hao (2018) pointed out that Chinese international students cherish their circle of fellow Chinese international students because they hold essential values in common and feel most supported by these friendships that assist in dealing with the academic and sociocultural challenges.

Reasons and Motivations for Learning Japanese

Japanese has been one of the popular languages for college students in the United States. Although the enrollment of students has decreased across most foreign language classes, only Japanese and Korean, out of the 15 most commonly taught languages, showed increases between 2013 and 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2018).

Japanese pop culture seems to be one of the significant attractions for students to study Japanese language in the United States (Japan Foundation, 2013). Japanese anime, video games, pop music, movies, and TV programs have attracted a significant number of students into Japanese classrooms. Research has identified various factors contributing to the motivation of continuing to learn Japanese (Matsumoto, 2007; Tsang, 2012). First, the enthusiasm level of the teacher significantly influences the students' motivation. Tsang (2012) found that students are motivated to stay in a Japanese class if the teachers genuinely care about them. Furthermore, teachers who create an encouraging learning environment and provide feedback also influence their motivations. Students value correction of mistakes as well as remarks on their learning progress. Concerning demotivational factors, the major ones include routine memorization of numerous characters, and inadequate opportunities to use the Japanese language outside class (Matsumoto, 2007; Tsang, 2012).

In China, Japanese is also one of the most popular foreign languages. China has 953,283 Japanese learners, the highest number in the world (Japan Foundation, 2017). Among them, 65.6% are in higher education institutions. The significant motivations to study Japanese at universities are interests in Japanese culture, Japan-related products, and employment opportunities (Gao & Lv, 2018; Huang & Feng, 2019; Teo et al., 2019). China has overwhelming been the first choice destination for Japanese companies when expanding their businesses overseas. In 2017, there were 32,349 Japanese companies in China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018). Although English is predominantly the first foreign language in China, knowing Japanese is considered beneficial for job hunting (Kubota, 2013).

While Japanese is one of the most challenging languages for native English speakers to achieve a high level of proficiency (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2012), Japanese is not necessarily as challenging for native speakers of Chinese. Although Chinese and Japanese are typologically different, Chinese characters known as *kanji*, form part of written Japanese, and a significant number of Sino-Japanese words constitute modern Japanese (Shibatani, 1990). Also, along with modern civilization in the first half of the 20th century, a large number of vocabularies written in Chinese characters created by Japanese were adapted into modern Chinese

(Norman, 1988; Novotna, 1967). Thus, memorization and text comprehension of Japanese words in Chinese characters are less challenging for Chinese learners of Japanese (Horiba, 2012). Also, the young generation of Chinese is familiar with Japanese culture, which is beneficial for language acquisition. First, China and Japan share certain cultural roots and traditions due to the cultural exchange over centuries. Second, Japan's modern pop culture has influenced younger generations of Chinese since China opened up to the world in 1978. Japanese manga, games, television dramas, and movies are easily accessible to younger generations of Chinese (Gao & Lv, 2018; Huang & Feng, 2019; Teo et al., 2019).

Mori and Takeuchi's (2016) research appears to be the only one examining reasons and experiences of Chinese international students learning Japanese in the United States. Although diversity on campus and in the classroom is the focus of their research, they compared Chinese international students with domestic students enrolled in third- or fourth-year Japanese courses. They found that Chinese international students study Japanese as an additional language to become more competitive in the global market, in addition to their interest in Japanese culture. In terms of their goals of learning Japanese, Chinese international students are more interested in the interpretive mode of communication than interpersonal communication. Also, Mori and Takeuchi (2016) pointed out that the current pace of instruction may be slow for some Chinese students. The dissatisfaction due to unmet needs might prompt some students to discontinue the Japanese program.

The studies presented thus far outline the reasons and motivations for learning Japanese in the United States and China. However, it is evident that Chinese international students in Japanese classes in the United States have not received much attention in the literature. Thus, this study focuses on Chinese international students' reasons and motivations for learning Japanese, given that international students generally do not need to complete a foreign language requirement.

While Mori and Takeuchi (2016) focused on Chinese international students in an advanced level of Japanese class, this study investigated students primarily in lower level classes and addressed the following questions:

1. What are the reasons and the goals of Chinese international students for studying Japanese as an additional foreign language?
2. What are their experiences of learning Japanese in class?
3. What kind of out-of-class learning activities have the students participated in, and how did they feel about those activities?
4. What are the reasons to continue or discontinue learning Japanese?

METHOD

Participants

During December 2017 and January 2018, I conducted individual interviews with 16 Chinese international students (10 female students and six male students). All the participants were from a large private university located in a city in the western

United States that runs on an academic quarter system and offers three levels of Japanese classes. I was a faculty member of the university and taught many Chinese international students enrolled in Japanese classes. In the 2016–2017 academic year, there were about 40 Chinese international students in the first-year Japanese class, accounting for nearly half of the first-year students. The number of Chinese international students decreased significantly in the second- and third-year Japanese classes (10 and five Chinese international students, respectively). Although undergraduate students must complete a foreign language requirement, students who completed academic secondary education in a language other than English are exempt from this language requirement. Thus, no participants were required to take any foreign language classes at the university.

All the participants graduated from high school in China. Before enrolling in regular classes, the majority of participants studied English for between 6 months and 1 year at the university's English Center. No participant had any experience of formal instruction in Japanese before taking Japanese classes at the university. The students started to take Japanese classes from the first quarter of the first-year Japanese class at this university. At the time of the interview, five of the participants had enrolled in Japanese classes: four were in the second-year class, and one was in the third-year class. Eleven students discontinued learning Japanese. Seven students stopped studying Japanese after one quarter or 1 year (three quarters). See Table 1 for the details of the participants.

Table 1: Summary of Participants

Participant	Code name	Gender	Enrollment	Completed quarters of Japanese
1	C1	M	Continuing	4
2	C2	M	Continuing	4
3	C3	M	Continuing	4
4	C4	F	Continuing	4
5	C5	F	Continuing	7
6	D1	F	Discontinuing	1
7	D2	F	Discontinuing	3
8	D3	F	Discontinuing	6
9	D4	M	Discontinuing	1
10	D5	M	Discontinuing	1
11	D6	F	Discontinuing	1
12	D7	F	Discontinuing	7
13	D8	F	Discontinuing	1
14	D9	F	Discontinuing	4
15	D10	F	Discontinuing	4
16	D11	M	Discontinuing	1

Note. Continuing enrollment indicates the student was enrolled in Japanese classes at the time of the interview. Discontinuing enrollment indicates students who stopped studying Japanese.

Procedures

Participant recruitment occurred either through emails sent directly from their instructors or through personal contacts. I directly contacted some participants, and some participants introduced me to others. Face-to-face, semistructured interviews formed the meeting structure. Before the interviews, the Institutional Review Board approved the process. Participants received an explanation of the nature of the study in person in English and read through and signed an informed consent form. In order to elicit the richest possible information and ensure a comfortable speaking environment, Mandarin Chinese was the language used during the interview. Interviews took place at a study room of the library on campus. The interviews lasted from 15 to 45 minutes.

The data were transcribed and subsequently coded iteratively (Dörnyei, 2007). First, codes developed from the research questions provided the basis to sort responses (e.g., reasons and goals of learning Japanese, successes and challenges in the classroom, extracurricular activities, reasons of dis/continuing learning Japanese). Within these categories, I identified high frequency item-level data (e.g., repeating words like job, grade point average [GPA], anime, major). When item-level data overlapped, I clustered them together under a broader level (e.g., culture, instrumental motivation, teacher, difficulty, academic major). I examined relationships between different categories and recorded my observations.

RESULTS

The following sections illustrate the similarities and differences between participants who continued or discontinued their study of Japanese, specifically regarding their reasons and goals for studying Japanese, in- and out-of-classroom experiences, and motivations to continue or discontinue learning Japanese.

Reasons for Studying Japanese

The participants' responses showed the multifaceted nature of their motivations to learn Japanese. Students who continued their enrollment commonly mentioned an interest in Japan and Japanese culture. Three of five continuing students mentioned that interest in Japanese anime or manga was one of the reasons that triggered their interest in taking Japanese classes. Students who continued their studies also evidenced instrumental motivation for studying Japanese. Four of five continuing students mentioned that learning Japanese is useful for them. Among them, three students mentioned that having Japanese proficiency in addition to Chinese and English is beneficial for future careers because "language is a tool," and one student said that knowing Japanese is also helpful for his future travel in Japan.

In contrast, only three of 11 students who discontinued their Japanese studies indicated that they decided to take the classes partially because of their interests in Japanese anime or manga. Only two of the 11 students mentioned that they took Japanese class because Japanese is beneficial for study abroad or future career.

Instead, students in discontinuing groups had distinctive reasons for learning Japanese. First, “*Wo tingshuo riyu ke hen shui* (I heard that Japanese class is an ‘easy A’ course)” was the most frequent answer for discontinuing students when asked why they decided to take Japanese classes. Nine of 11 students emphasized that one of the reasons for studying Japanese was that they heard from their friends that Japanese class is “easy.” They further explained the importance of having an “easy” class in their schedule. The reasons included to receive credits with less effort, to maintain or improve GPA, and to balance an already stressful class schedule. For example, D6 said that Japanese was simply an easy class to get the necessary credits for graduation. She had no interest in Japanese and no intention to study Japanese in the first place. The reason she chose the Japanese class was that she could not enroll in other “easy” courses. Thus, D6 made the least possible effort to receive the necessary credits. D7 had a similar reason. She took Japanese because she could not enroll in an oil painting class.

Five discontinuing students highlighted the importance of maintaining or improving a GPA. For example, D4 had no interest in Japanese anime and manga. He emphasized that one of the reasons he chose Japanese was because he did not want to have an elective course negatively affect his GPA. Instead, taking a Japanese class could positively impact his GPA because his friends told him that it was easy to receive an A.

Furthermore, three students responded that they needed a less stressful class when taking three courses in their majors, which required significant effort. Several discontinuing students enrolled in a particular college in the university, and, because of prerequisites and sequential class schedules of that college, the students usually selected required classes first. In general, they chose three courses in their major fields first, and then tried to enroll in an elective class. Because of challenges in their major classes, they needed one more comfortable class to balance out their workloads. As a result, Japanese became one of the popular choices among classes such as piano, drawing, and photography.

Second, discontinuing students also emphasized the importance of their friends in the decision-making process. All 11 discontinuing students took Japanese because they wanted to take the same course as their friends or their friends recommended the Japanese course to them. Third, several students also mentioned that they took Japanese because they heard the instructors of Japanese classes were friendly.

D4’s comments on his reasons to learn Japanese are representative of discontinuing students:

“I don’t watch Anime.”

“I am not good at languages. I want to study Japanese to see how it looks like.”

“Because my friends were going to take Japanese.”

“Who is the instructor is also important.”

“I don’t want to receive B at an elective class, which negatively affects my GPA.”

“I decided to take a relatively easy class in which I have a little interest as long as the instructor is friendly, and friends are also in the class.”

“Japanese was relatively easy. It was easy to get an A as long as you studied hard.”

Goals for Studying Japanese

Most participants who did not continue the course mentioned that they had no goals or specific Japanese proficiency level they wanted to achieve. Most of them had a taste of Japanese class and stopped as D4 mentioned previously. Only one student, D9, indicated that she wanted to achieve a proficiency level at which she was able to understand a Japanese television program without the help of subtitles.

All continuing students displayed concrete goals or a specific Japanese proficiency they aimed to achieve. Three students emphasized communication proficiency in daily or business settings. C3 notably indicated the ability to translate from Japanese to Chinese. Because of his interest in anime, his goal was to be able to translate Japanese anime into Chinese. C1 directly mentioned that his goal was to pass the N1, which is the highest level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, the most widely recognized standardized test of Japanese. He mentioned that “A language is a tool. You must test whether it works well. Since you have studied, you must get the ‘tool.’ Otherwise, it is just a waste of time.”

Positive Experience in Class

In general, participants displayed no significant distinctions concerning the in-class experience of class instructions and Japanese instructors. Overall, all participants gave positive comments on Japanese class. They enjoyed learning in the Japanese classes, had a feeling of accomplishment, felt a sense of equality with domestic students, and shared a great time with their instructors. C1 even used “perfect” to describe his Japanese classes. Only one discontinuing student mentioned that one of the reasons she stopped learning Japanese was because of dissatisfaction with her instructor.

As expected, most participants noted that the Japanese class was not challenging. First, Chinese characters are one of the reasons for the ease of learning Japanese. Also, some participants emphasized that specific grammar points were easy for the native speaker of Chinese. D2 used topicalization as an example to illustrate the similarity between Chinese and Japanese languages. For example, when people describe things on a table, the Chinese and Japanese share a similar structure. Another participant, C4, mentioned that grammar points, such as the use of the Japanese particle “*no*,” were remarkably similar to the Chinese particle “*de*.” For her, it was so straightforward that no explanation was necessary.

Further, two participants emphasized the cultural similarities between China and Japan to explain the ease and enjoyment of Japanese class. Although providing no examples, C5 said that “sometimes I wonder why American students ask why Japanese must be spoken in certain ways.” For her and perhaps other Chinese students, it was easier to understand specific Japanese usage because of cultural

similarities between Japan and China. Cultural similarities also appeared to influence the relationship between students and instructors. D10 noted that she felt that she and her female Japanese instructor shared a similar way of thinking, even had a similar fashion sense, which made her feel much closer to her Japanese instructor than to other American professors.

Meanwhile, several participants mentioned that Japanese class gave them a sense of accomplishment. They felt that they built up new vocabulary and grammar knowledge each day. Whenever they heard, saw, or used some words or grammar learned on anime, at grocery stores, or in Japanese restaurants, they felt joy at learning Japanese.

Japanese classes were enjoyable not only because of their relative ease but also because the participants had more opportunities to interact with classmates and instructors, something rare in other classes. They mentioned that the instructors of the Japanese classes were amiable and accessible for questions. In particular, D6 emphasized that Chinese international students thought it was beneficial to have Japanese faculty from China because they could ask questions in Chinese after class.

Most participants also mentioned the feeling of “equality” in Japanese class. Due to different English proficiency among the participants, some students avoided class participation in classes taught in English. D1 said that she was not as confident in classes taught in English in comparison to her Japanese classes. Since almost everyone in the Japanese class learned Japanese from scratch regardless of nationality, she felt that everyone was on the same level and equal. Another participant, D7, mentioned she felt domestic students had to put up with her English in other classes taught in English. In Japanese class, however, she felt that finally, they were equal because none of them were native speakers of Japanese. She said:

At other classes, American students are very tolerant because I am not a native speaker of English. However, it is not equality. They are trying to understand what you are saying. It’s a feeling of being tolerated. At Japanese class, no matter you are Chinese or American, everyone is the same. But at other classes, we are different because they are native [speakers of English].

Challenges in Class

When asked about the challenges of the Japanese language and Japanese class, the majority of participants responded that Japanese was not as easy as they expected even though it was not very difficult. Only one participant, D7, considered the language too complicated to understand.

First, grammar was described as the most challenging area of study. Several participants particularly mentioned conjugation and the honorific forms. It is noteworthy that students who discontinued learning after 1 or 2 years of study illustrated specific difficulties learning Japanese. Participants who stopped learning after one quarter provided a general explanation for their difficulties. For them, the challenge was vocabulary memorization because they had to prepare for vocabulary quizzes. Some students felt that memorizing vocabulary for quizzes was a burden for them even though “it was not that difficult” (D4). Furthermore, there were five

discontinuing students who said their reluctance to spend time on homework and reviewing contributed to the challenge of Japanese class. For example, D6 took first quarter Japanese twice. The first time she dropped the class because her instructor told her that she probably would fail the class. Even when repeating the class, she said she did not study Japanese outside class. As long as she could pass, she had no intention to study hard.

Second, several participants also commented on the difficulty of understanding the English explanation in the textbook. While acknowledging the class design was for English speakers, they noted that while English explanations in the textbook might be useful for domestic students, those explanations might not be necessary for them and indeed might even be confusing. For them, Chinese resources were helpful when encountering problems. D3 mentioned that she had to turn to a Japanese instructor from China to explain grammar in Chinese because she could not understand the explanation provided by textbooks and another instructor in English. When she moved to the next level, the instructor was an American who could not provide an explanation in Chinese. Consequently, she stopped studying Japanese because she could not understand the English explanations in the textbook or from the instructors. C3 mentioned that he had to consult with books in Chinese to help him understand explanations of grammar. He said:

When I review, I will compare textbooks with other books in Chinese. My English is not good. I wanted to know how certain grammars were explained in Chinese books because the English explanations in the textbook were difficult to understand. It was much easier to understand the explanations in Chinese books.

Out-of-Class Activities

No significant distinctions existed between participants who continued or discontinued Japanese regarding their experience of extracurricular activities. Considering the Japanese program offered only limited extracurricular activities, participants first identified whether they participated in any Japanese out-of-class activities. Then they were asked about their experience in out-of-class activities in other classes.

The majority of participants never participated in any Japanese out-of-class activities. Only two students participated in the Japanese-related club at the university. C1 went to the Japanese Culture Club once. He stopped participating because the scheduled activities were not enjoyable. For him, unappealing activities included communicating with simple grammar, talking about movies, or taking quizzes on knowledge about Japanese such as “What is *arubaito*?” When asked what kind of activities interested him, he listed the following things: “deeper discussion about Japanese grammar, especially grammars for spoken languages; things you won’t learn from your instructors; things about Japanese that people usually don’t know.”

Another participant, D1, stopped going to Anime Club after a couple of times because of cultural differences. She liked an anime called “*natsume yuujiin tayo*” in

Japanese. However, she only knew the reading of the title as “*xiaomu youren zhang*” in Chinese and the names of characters of the anime in Chinese. Pronunciations of the title and names of characters in Chinese are utterly different from those in English, which made the conversation about the anime with other American students difficult. She further mentioned:

I don't want to go to the club anymore. We chatted about animes before and after the screening, but I could not hold the conversation. Very exhausting. Characters' names, titles, all were different. We had to use pictures (to communicate). I felt exhausted.

When asked about participation in out-of-class activities in other classes, all participants mentioned they only participated in minimal out-of-class activities. Most of the time, those activities were required. If not required, they preferred spending time on their studies. Although extra credits were incentives for some students, others mentioned that they still would not participate unless they needed extra credits to improve their grades.

Four of 16 students indicated that they would like to participate in activities related to Japanese traditional culture such as a tea ceremony because they usually do not have opportunities to do that. However, they also remarked that they would prioritize their major class studies if there was a schedule conflict.

Reasons for Continuing or Discontinuing Japanese Studies

As noted above, students who continued their Japanese studies had clear goals when learning Japanese. Thus, it is natural for them to continue learning for individual purposes. They continued learning Japanese to achieve a specific proficiency level of Japanese, including passing the N1 level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. Enjoyable learning experiences also motivated them to stay in Japanese classes.

However, despite the positive learning experience all participants had, 11 chose not to continue learning Japanese. Close examination of the comments of the discontinuing students reveals at least two primary reasons for discontinuing Japanese learning. First, four of 11 participants mentioned that their schedules were full and without room for Japanese classes. These four students completed between one and seven quarters of Japanese classes. For them, their priority was study in their major fields because of the impact on their graduation schedule. For them, the Japanese class appeared always to be secondary and replaceable. For example, D7 decided to stop learning Japanese after more than 2 years (seven quarters). She had no interest in Japan when she started studying Japanese. She started with Japanese only because of her friend's recommendation. She enjoyed learning Japanese in class and felt very satisfied when she became able to talk with a Japanese chef in Japanese at a restaurant. When a friend with whom she was having dinner was surprised at her fluency in Japanese, she was very proud of herself. However, even so, she discontinued learning because “Japanese is a language I can learn by myself in the future. But graduation is about my life.”

Some participants also wanted a taste of Japanese. They had no intention of continuing Japanese study in the first place. They were either curious about the

Japanese language or wanted an “easy” class. Three of five students in this group decided not to continue because the class turned out not to be as easy as they thought because of the required effort for quizzes and homework. The other two students mentioned that they had no intention of continuing in the first place because they needed an “easy” class for that quarter.

Meanwhile, there were two participants whose reasons were different. One student stopped because she did not like her new Japanese instructor’s teaching style after taking six quarters of Japanese. Another student stopped because of some personal issues after four quarters of Japanese classes.

DISCUSSION

The findings of students who continued their Japanese studies are consistent with those of Mori and Takeuchi (2016) that Chinese international students take Japanese because of interest in Japanese culture and possible positive impact on future careers. The continuing students also showed clear goals when learning Japanese. Achieving a certain level of Japanese proficiency was their motivation. Continuing students also emphasized translation ability.

The most interesting finding is about students who discontinued their studies. As noted previously, the teacher, course feedback, difficulty of the class, and feelings of progress are four salient factors that motivate Japanese learners in U.S. universities (Matsumoto, 2007; Tsang, 2012). However, the present study’s findings suggest alternative explanations for why Chinese students discontinued taking Japanese language classes, at least among this study’s participants. Although all participants had a positive learning experience in Japanese classes, including friendly instructors and an enjoyable in-class experience, those positive factors did not motivate them to keep learning Japanese. Even more, and especially in the case of D7, the feelings of progress, achievement, and satisfaction of learning Japanese were insufficient to keep them in Japanese classes.

Another critical finding was about the myth that Chinese international students take Japanese simply because it is “easy.” These results reveal that although the relative ease of learning Japanese for Chinese international students can be one of the motivating reasons to take Japanese classes, it is not the primary reason motivating students to continue learning Japanese. Instead, the study shows that many students consider Japanese classes as a means to “outsmart” the university’s dominant GPA-oriented system (Nomura et al., 2019). In addition, considering the academic, emotional, and social challenges that Chinese international students face, Japanese classes also appeared to provide a space in which the students could enjoy and feel secure, something that they usually did not experience in other classes (Kubota, 2011; Nomura et al., 2019).

The current study also found that for the students who discontinued their studies of Japanese, graduation on time was the primary concern. This result confirmed the findings in the literature that Chinese international students’ primary concern is academic success (Hao, 2018; Heng, 2017, 2018; Yan & Berliner, 2011). As a result, whether the reason for learning Japanese was to maintain or improve GPA, to have a taste of Japanese language or Japanese culture, to connect with friends, or participate

in out-of-class activities regardless of whether the activity is Japan-related, their priority was the study in their major fields, while learning a second foreign language is always secondary. To be able to graduate on time was the most critical factor for their study.

The current study also showed a picture of diversity among Chinese international students, often considered a homogeneous group (Griner & Sobol, 2014; Hao, 2018; Heng, 2017, 2018). Although to a certain extent, the participants who continued or discontinued their Japanese studies shared some similarities, distinctions existed in terms of motivations and reasons for studying Japanese. Thus, instructors must acknowledge the diversity among Chinese international students in Japanese classes.

Further, the findings indicated several significant considerations for the future of Japanese language education. First, in addition to the interest in Japanese pop culture, the primary reason that Chinese international students keep learning Japanese is to gain add-on value. This add-on value can vary individually. Some students wish to apply Japanese in future careers in business settings. Some students aim to gain the ability to communicate with Japanese in informal settings. For example, C3 especially emphasized his goal of being able to translate Japanese television programs into Chinese. To meet these different needs, program directors and instructors may need to design different courses or differentiated modules within a course to better address students' individual needs (Mori & Takeuchi, 2016). For example, a translation course can add a module for translating Japanese in media such as television programs and movies or allow students to choose their desired materials to translate. In a business Japanese course, instructors may need to consider Japanese usage outside of business settings in Japan and the United States to prepare international students to be ready for using Japanese in their home countries. Further, while achieving a certain level on the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, usually N2, is required for nonnative speakers searching for a job in Japan and Japan-related jobs in other countries, preparation courses for the proficiency test might be beneficial for domestic and international students (Hudson-Endo, 2014).

Second, one of the challenges that Chinese international students faced is that they learned Japanese via English. Since foreign language classes in U.S. higher education institutions have traditionally been designed primarily for native speakers of English, it can be challenging for some students because of their various English proficiencies and linguistic backgrounds. As indicated by the participants' comments, sometimes English explanations provided by textbooks and instructors were not necessarily helpful for them. The difficulty may have been with students' English proficiency or unfamiliarity with linguistic terms in English. Resources in the students' native languages would facilitate learning. As Mori and Takeuchi (2016) pointed out, however, instructors are rarely proficient in the native languages of all their international students. If the development of linguistic proficiency is the primary goal, it is of importance to increase faculty with international backgrounds to provide useful guidance and individualized instruction to various international students. Also, program directors and instructors can work with the university library to make complementary learning materials in other languages available for international students.

Meanwhile, the results of the interviews also revealed the importance of being visible on campus for the Japanese program to recruit students. Many students mentioned that they started learning Japanese in the second year on campus. They did not know about Japanese class offerings until friends recommended Japanese classes or their friends were going to take the same class. Program directors can work with the international office on campus to make foreign language class information available to international students when they arrive on campus. Given that Chinese international students often seek academic and emotional support from their international peer students (Hao, 2018), it is also essential to integrate enrolled students in the process of recruitment.

CONCLUSION

Limitations

Given that interviews from only a small number of Chinese international student participants from a single private university took place for this research, the study's findings cannot necessarily be generalized to other contexts. Further, the interviews were between the Chinese international students and their former instructor. The relationship between the participants as well as my background (e.g., native speaker of Chinese, an international student in Japan and the United States for a number of years, an advanced Japanese learner, and teacher of Japanese in the United States for a number of years) might have influenced the participants' responses and the interpretations of their responses by the researcher.

Future Research

Future research should investigate students from various institutions as well as with different backgrounds to address the issues of foreign language education related to international students. Also, future work could focus on the instructors' perspectives on teaching diverse international students in foreign language classes. Additionally, a combination of surveys and interviews might lead to a broader understanding of Chinese international students' learning experiences.

Increasing Chinese international student enrollment has influenced various aspects of higher education, including Japanese language classes, at universities in the United States. Nevertheless, the (de)motivational factors of learning Japanese for Chinese international students, as well as their experiences in and out of class, have received little research attention. The findings of this study showed that Chinese international students are a diverse group rather than a homogeneous one considering that they start and continue or discontinue learning Japanese for various reasons. The results also indicated that the reasons Chinese international students take Japanese classes are not merely because of so-called easiness as some anecdotal experience might suggest. The expectations of academic success among Chinese international students, as many studies have suggested (Hao, 2018; Heng, 2017, 2018; Yan & Berliner, 2011), played an essential role in the participants' decision-making process. Acknowledging the growing diverse backgrounds of international students in a

foreign language classroom, the insights that emerge from this study can inform foreign language instructors, program directors, and institutions about recruiting and retaining students, teaching, and training, and eventually help improve the learning experience of international students in the future.

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