Language learning motivation research in China has shifted dramatically in recent years. In this paper, I describe how in the past, studies in China focused on classifying learners according to Gardner’s (1985) integrative and instrumental orientations. This approach usually found expectations of family and society to be the driving force behind Chinese students’ L2 motivation to such an extent that scholars speculated that China had a unique instrumentally oriented ethos, and motivational orientations such as Required Motivation and the Chinese Imperative were created to explore this phenomenon. Although such studies were informative, the net result was often a characterization of Chinese students as learners whose motivation was a non-agentic response to external sociocultural pressures.

Recently, in parallel with the L2 motivation field in general, the theoretical focus in China has shifted away from classifying learners and towards concentrating on the role of the self in language learning. A number of significant studies conducted in China based on Dornyei’s (2009) L2 Motivational Self System have lately been published, and these offer a more nuanced perspective on the motivational profile of Chinese students.

To illustrate this theoretical shift and its consequences, I share the results of a recent longitudinal interview-based panel study I conducted with undergraduate English learners in China (N = 30) that used Dornyei’s framework to analyze the processes through which external demands are internalized into students’ self-concept and influence their L2 effort. In contrast to research conducted under the previous paradigm, the findings show many Chinese students not as passive responders but as active agents who selectively filter the sociocultural pressures they integrate into their L2 Self. Based on these findings and those of similar studies, I conclude by looking ahead at what could be next in the field of L2 motivation research in China.

Keywords: L2 Self, Motivation, China.