Journal of Literature & Language, 2025, 1(1), 50-65
https://doi.org/10.71204/jhxdxz72

Identity in Second Language Learning: Theoretical Perspectives and Research Trends with an Emphasis on Chinese as a Second Language

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Received: 31 March 2025 /Accepted: 29 April 2025 /Published online: 2 May 2025

Abstract

This paper critically reviews the conceptualisations of identity in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), with particular attention to both psychological and poststructuralist sociocultural perspectives. Drawing on foundational and contemporary literature, the evolution of identity theories and their relevance to language learning, motivation, and self-construction have been reviewed. The analysis highlights how identity is shaped and reshaped through interaction with social, cultural, and linguistic environments across varied learner contexts, including migrant experiences, foreign language classrooms, and study-abroad programmes. A special focus is placed on learners of Chinese as a second or heritage language, revealing both shared and unique identity negotiation processes. While SLA identity research has expanded in scope, it remains limited by narrow theoretical approaches and insufficient attention to context-specific dynamics. This paper calls for more nuanced, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary investigations to capture the complexity of identity transformation in language learners.

Keywords: SLA; Identity; Culture; Sociocultural Perspectives

1. Introduction and Methodological Framework

1.1. Introduction

In recent decades, identity has become an important topic in applied linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA), especially the role of identity in shaping language learning experiences (Block, 2003; Norton, 2013). Identity is not a fixed attribute, but a fluid and dynamic construct influenced by internal beliefs and values, as well as by external cultural, social, and linguistic forces (Jenkins, 2014; Bamberg, 2011). For some language learners who navigate multilingual and multicultural environments, their sense of self evolves in response to new

affiliations, which may shift power dynamics, and diverse communicative practices (Norton, 2000a).

This paper critically explores the concept of identity within SLA, examining how it has been theorised from both psychological and sociocultural perspectives. Psychological approaches often emphasise individual motivation and identity, such as in Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, such as the *ideal self*, which links future self-guides to language learning motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). In contrast, sociocultural theories foreground the relational and discursive construction of identity in context, as seen in Norton's poststructuralist framing of identity as negotiated through language, power, investment, and social positioning (Norton, 2013).

Furthermore, the paper situates identity research within three major SLA contexts: adult migrant learners, foreign language classrooms, and study abroad programmes (Block, 2009; Norton, 2000a). Special attention is given to learners of Chinese as a second or heritage language, a relatively underexplored area in identity studies (Duff et al., 2013; Shi, 2017). These learners present unique identity trajectories, influenced by language ideologies and cultural proximity or distance in host or home communities. By synthesising theoretical and empirical findings across these diverse contexts, this review aims to illuminate current debates, identify gaps in the literature, and suggest directions for future research that embrace the complexity and diversity of language learner identities.

1.2. Methodology of Literature Selection

This review adopted a structured yet flexible approach to the selection and analysis of literature. Academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar were systematically searched to identify relevant studies published between 2000 and 2024. The following keywords were employed in various combinations: *identity*, *second language acquisition*, *Chinese as a second language*, and *heritage language learners*.

Studies were included if they explicitly addressed the relationship between identity and language learning, with particular emphasis on empirical investigations involving Chinese as a second or heritage language. Priority was given to qualitative studies that offered in-depth insights into identity construction in second language learning contexts. Quantitative studies were included selectively where they provided supplementary perspectives or supported qualitative findings. Exclusion criteria included studies that focused exclusively on language proficiency outcomes without reference to identity construction, or papers lacking empirical or theoretical rigour.

The process was informed by principles of qualitative meta-synthesis, whereby recurring themes, conceptual frameworks, and methodological patterns were identified and critically synthesised. This systematic approach aimed to enhance the transparency, coherence, and reproducibility of the review while maintaining flexibility to capture emerging perspectives.

2. Identity Conceptualisations

2.1. The Nature of Identity

Identity, as a popular topic, is widely studied in the field of social science, within subjects such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. In the last few decades, the number of publications on identity has increased rapidly (Vignoles et al., 2011).

As the topic has gained popularity, it can be found that the term *identity* has been defined in many different ways, using words such as personality, self-values and beliefs, sense of group, and nationalism in the social, cultural and historical context (Brown, 2000; Schildkraut, 2007). That is to say, identity can be treated as a label when a person tries to differentiate and integrate a sense of self in different dimensions socially and personally (Bamberg, 2011). To some degree, in this literature, a sense of self is often equated with an individual's identity (Bamberg, 2011).

Different perspectives can produce different highlights on identity. From a psychological perspective, identity is often treated as an internal factor that includes beliefs, values, and an understanding of individual self (Côté & Levine, 2014). The beliefs and values can be shaped by external factors, such as social communications, cultural norms, and community values (Erikson, 1968). In 2005, Dörnyei proposed a new concept of L2 motivation, the L2 Motivational Self System, based on the psychological theory of possible selves – what learners might be, what they want to be and are afraid to be (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005). The central concept in this system is the *ideal self*, the identity that L2 learners hope to obtain in their L2 community, which becomes the motivation for learning the target language (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). At the same time, Dornyei also proposes the auxiliary concept of *ought-to self*: asking what kind of identity L2 learners should have. The development of these concepts establishes the relationship between motivation and identity. Supposing that the ability to speak a foreign language plays an essential part in one's ideal self or ought-to self, in seeking to reduce the gap between the current self and the future self, the L2 learner will have a strong motivation to learn this foreign language. In other words, one's motivation, beliefs and learning experiences can shape one's identity (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

Increasingly, identity has also dominated the sociological field as the importance of the social and cultural aspects of human experience and identity have been explored (Jenkins, 1996, 2014). Jenkins views identity as a dialectic between the internal and external world, which is fluid and dynamic, and containing possible tensions and oppositions as individuals experience diverse contexts (Jenkins, 2014). Norton developed the idea of identity from a sociocultural perspective and defined identity from the poststructuralist perspective as "*how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future*" (Norton, 2013, p. 45). According to poststructuralist theory, identity is not a solid thing but is continually constructed and negotiated by its social and cultural contexts through language and discourse, which are diverse, contradictory, and dynamic (Norton, 1995, 2013).

To some extent, Norton's identity theory bears similarities to the concept of the Ideal L2 Self (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), since both emphasise the importance of self-construction and the

complexity of identity. The concept of the Ideal L2 Self is related to learner motivation, but is also affected by learners' identity and social environment (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), which is related to Norton's view of identity as shaped by social and cultural contexts (Norton, 2013). However, differing from the psychological perspective, which is more focused on internal factors, complexity and dynamics are crucial to understanding identity from a sociocultural perspective, as identity is shaped through social interactions and relationships (Norton, 2000).

While these perspectives share common ground in recognising the dynamic nature of identity, they diverge in ways that carry important theoretical and practical implications. Dörnyei's psychological model (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) prioritises internal motivation and future self-guides, which may inadequately address the structural barriers learners encounter in accessing language learning opportunities. Conversely, Norton's (Norton, 2000; Norton, 2013) sociocultural framing highlights the influence of social power relations on identity construction but may underemphasise the role of individual aspiration and proactive agency. A more holistic understanding of language learner identity, thus, might require integrating these perspectives, recognising that learners' internal motivations and external social environments interact dynamically to shape their evolving identities.

Meanwhile, Wu (2011) also pointed out that identity is the concept according to which people label themselves and are labelled by others, so that identity can also be defined as a reflection of individuals' understandings of the relationship between themselves and others (Ige, 2010). Sedikides and Brewer (2015) divided identity into three levels: *individual*, *relational,* and *collective*. Individual identity, the first level, is about self-definition. Self-determination, self-evaluation, self-esteem, beliefs and values may be included in this aspect. Relational identity refers to an individual's different roles when interacting with others. A person, for example, could have multiple identities when facing different people, such as son, father, husband, researcher, and driver. Collective identity is about the social group that they belong to, which means that people in the same group may share some beliefs, faith, and even feelings. Taken together, the three levels of identity compose one's whole identity and no level can be separated from any other (Vignoles et al., 2011). In the context of SLA, and particularly among learners of Chinese as a second or heritage language, these levels may interact dynamically. For example, a CSL learner may construct an individual identity as a competent bilingual speaker, a relational identity when engaging with native speakers or heritage communities, and a collective identity when affiliating with broader cultural groups such as Chinese-speaking societies. These identities may evolve or conflict depending on the learner's linguistic competence, cultural acceptance, and social experiences, illustrating the complexity and fluidity of identity negotiation within the process of language learning (Duff et al., 2013).

Studying abroad involves exposure to different languages, cultures, and communities (Berg et al., 2009). Through this experience, learners are likely to encounter diverse experiences and challenges, which could impact their self-perception (Dervin & Risager, 2014). Furthermore, studying abroad provides an opportunity to build new relationships, as learners could interact with individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Berg et al., 2009). At the collective level, learners may develop a new understanding of the new community and may identify

themselves as members of the community. Alternatively, they may reject or be rejected by the community (Dervin & Risager, 2014). These aspects of the study abroad experience are all relevant to Sedikides and Brewer's (2015) model of identity.

2.2. The Importance of Identity Research in SLA

The role the social element plays in promoting or hindering language acquisition is under increasing consideration from the sociocultural perspective (Norton, 2013). As reviewed above, Norton (1995, 2011) criticised second language acquisition research from the cognitive perspective, believing that research on identity and second language learning should be considered within a broader social environment; that is, in terms of identity, power, and ideology. According to Block (2003), the sociocultural view of SLA (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), according to which communicative ability and collaborative learning are essential during the process of acquiring a language, provides the foundations for *the social turn in SLA* (Blair, 2022). These arguments lay the ground for the study of the social and cultural identity of language learners, as learners constantly communicate with people around them and integrate communicative practices in the process of acquiring language. They also negotiate their own identities, their relationship to those around them, and their relationship to the target language community. This has stimulated research and development in the area of identity in SLA (Norton, 2013).

At the same time, since the end of the 1980s, economic and cultural globalisation has increased tremendously along with deregulation of the international market (Cameron, 2000). An increasing number of people go abroad for study, and there is substantial immigration and digital and other forms of communication breaking down barriers between societies. Many people have begun to learn one or more foreign languages and use them as a tool for communication, and have led to greater diversity in many countries (Norton, 2013). *Who am I?* is becoming a distinctive question for both native speakers and language learners in this globalised world (Norton, 2013).

At the same time, drawing on Le Page's concept of *Acts of Identity* (Le Page, 1986; Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 2020), language behaviour is seen as an external manifestation of the complex process of identity construction, whereby individuals consciously or unconsciously express and negotiate their social identities through linguistic choices that can be directly observed. People may perform as members of the community that they expect to belong to by adhering to certain community language behaviours (Le Page, 1986; Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 2020). For example, when talking with foreigners, some Chinese people might change their language to English, in the expectation of joining the English-speaking group (Cao, 2012). Therefore, an individual could change languages on purpose (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 2020) – actually shifting their linguistic and potentially cultural identity while engaged with others socially and culturally in different communities. These chances for aspects of identity to respond to these environmental changes and opportunities support consideration of the ways that certain groups might construct and reconstruct their sense of self as they move more fully into and within different sociocultural contexts. SLA, specifically CSL, and immersion experiences provide a rich opportunity to explore the possible shifts in identity that may occur during study abroad.

3. Research into identity and SLA

So far, research on second language learners and identity has focused on three main areas:

(1) Identity in adult migrant contexts (Learning English).

(2) Identity in foreign language contexts (studying L2 outside the target language country).

(3) Identity in study abroad contexts (Block, 2009).

3.1. Identity in Adult Migrant Contexts (Learning English)

Research on immigration mainly focuses on adult immigrants entering a new country, and an account of a series of identity shifts brought about by cultural, work and life experiences (Norton, 2000, 2013; Pavlenko et al., 2002). Being uprooted and brought to a new land willingly or as a refugee underpins what can be traumatic experiences as individuals and families try to re-establish themselves in a foreign environment, often without knowledge of the home language and unsure of socio-cultural sensitivities (Fazel et al., 2012). For example, Norton (2000, 2013) used interviews and diaries to track five women who immigrated to Canada. Based on their different stories, Norton analysed the speaking opportunities in adult language classrooms, how participants created, took advantage of or resisted these speaking opportunities, and analysed learner behaviours in terms of possible changing identities. She treated identity as a site of power struggles in these circumstances because she believed that these female participants were constantly fighting for the opportunity to speak and struggling for rights in order to finally achieve a new positionality in Canada, since they could speak the target language and gain respect from the locals. Although my research did not involve immigration study, Norton's ideas concerning identity and SLA were helpful in my own research, particularly her work on investment, imbalanced power and imaged identity (Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000; Norton, 2013). These provide insights into the dynamic power imbalance between language learners and native speakers and emphasise the importance of language learners' investment in improving their language competence, ultimately leading to the negotiation and construction of their identity within the new community.

3.2. Identity in Foreign Language Contexts (Studying L2 Outside the Target Language Country)

Norton's work focuses on students who are learning English as a second language through classroom learning and while living in an immersive situation i.e. where English was a dominant language in society (along with French) although it may not have been used in the home. However, for those learning a foreign language, the classroom is usually the main or only place where communication in the target language takes place (Block, 2009). Tens of thousands of primary, secondary, and higher education institutions around the world offer L2 or FL courses for local students (Graddol, 2006). Although their learning environments and student situations vary, the latter students have one thing in common: language learning is often restricted to participation in that one environment (Block, 2009) unless Study abroad experiences are available. Research on this context covers a wide range of aspects, such as motivations (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), teaching methods (Zubenko, 2022), and teacher identity (Hamilton, 2010; Kayi-Aydar, 2019;

Shin & Rubio, 2022; Vinogradova & Ross, 2019). In general, most studies agree that a foreign language learner, learns specific language knowledge and skills (e.g. phonics, vocabulary, and grammar) but may have few opportunities for communicative work and usually lacks experience of sociocultural aspects of the target language (Block, 2009).

Here is a typical practical research that confirms the above argument. Lantolf and Genung (2003) observed the experience of one of the authors, Patricia Genung, who was studying Chinese in the United States. The entire observation was conducted in the form of a foreign language learning diary. At the very beginning, Genung's learning motivation was "social learning motivation", as she wanted to use Chinese as a communication tool. However, throughout the learning process, although the aim of the Chinese course was stated as communication, there were very few interactive activities. Tutors seemed to focus on grammar explanation and pattern practice. Tutors sometimes even criticised students in class because of homework errors, causing students anxiety and stress (Lantolf & Genung, 2003). Over time, Genung believed that her learning motivation changed to "cognitive motivation". That is to say, Genung no longer paid too much attention to whether she could communicate with Chinese people in Chinese but focused on understanding and using the language to achieve good grades. At this time, Genung 's definition of a "successful language learner" was also changing to a student who can get high marks. Through this study, on the one hand, it can be seen that the influence of the teachers' teaching methods on students' learning motivation and attitude; on the other hand, the foreign language learning diary, as a research method of tracking the observation record. Meanwhile, it can be a good way to collect in-depth data and conduct dynamic longitudinal research on individuals, as it can provide insights into students' reflections on experiences and interactions, and into the shifting of students' identities throughout the entire learning process.

At the same time, Kramsch (2000) argues that writing can be a powerful tool in developing students' identities in non-immersive language teaching environments. Since writing is often not an improvised process, students have sufficient time to think and revise their work. This process allows them to develop a deeper relationship with the target language and consider how they can become proficient language users, which can affect their sense of self to some extent.

In a study conducted by Norton and Toohey (2011), language learners in Canada participated in a remote language exchange programme where they were paired with native French speakers for regular online communication. The study found that the participants felt the programme increased their confidence in cross-cultural communication and gave them a new awareness and understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity. This demonstrates how language and culture can influence one's identity. Meanwhile, many studies have also demonstrated the influence of international teachers on students' identity (Lee & Kim, 2017; Li & Zhu, 2013). For example, international teachers can bring the culture of their own country into the classroom, which can increase students' interest in the language and culture of the target country. Even if students have no chance to experience it personally, the interaction with teachers can help students develop a deeper understanding of the culture, thereby increasing their sense of self within the target culture to some extent (Stanley, 2013). Moreover, students may sometimes learn and imitate the ideas

and behaviours of international teachers (Stanley, 2013), which can also influence their sense of self.

From the above, it can be seen that even if the learner is not physically present in the target language country, learning a language and culture may change their sense of self and awareness of the world (Norton & Toohey, 2011).

3.3. Identity in Study Abroad Contexts

Studies on study-abroad contexts mainly focus on the experience of living and studying abroad in an effort to analyse the impacts of study abroad on international students' identity construction in various aspects, such as language acquisition, acculturation, and cross-cultural communication (Benson et al., 2012; Kinginger, 2011; Sánchez Hernández, 2017; Twombly et al., 2012; Viol & Klasen, 2021; Yang & Kim, 2011). These studies show that studying abroad can have a significant impact on individuals' identities as they are exposed to new cultures, languages, and ways of `thinking. These SA students have had temporary but immersive exposure to and engagement with the target language in a wide range of authentic situations, experiencing and responding to emotional and sociocultural issues, establishing a new sense of belonging, and actively engaging with communities, groups and individuals (Mitchell et al., 2015). However, some students may find themselves so overwhelmed by the challenges to their sense of identity that they separate themselves from wider groupings and restrict themselves to their temporary home and any formal classroom learning (Savicki & Cooley, 2011). This experience offers opportunities for students to rethink, and even reconstruct, their identities and their relationship with the social world (Dervin & Risager, 2014).

4. Important studies looking at Identity and SLA Chinese

4.1. Non-Heritage Learners of Chinese

As reviewed above, various studies have been published about identity and SLA in learning European languages, especially learning English as a second language, which highlights how learning a new language can influence one’s sense of self (Block, 2003; Clément & Norton, 2021; Kanno, 2008; Norton, 2013). However, there has been limited research related to identity and learning Chinese as a second language (e.g. Liu & Yang, 2012; Shi, 2017).

Several studies have focused on international students’ cultural identity and intercultural adaptation while learning Chinese in China. For example, Liu (2000) and Yang (2012) pointed out that international students’ cultural identity was multifaceted, fluid, and dynamic, rather than fixed. This conception of cultural fluidity both complements and challenges Norton’s (2013) power dynamics framework, which foregrounds the role of structural constraints in identity construction. While Norton stresses how societal power relations shape language learners' access to identity positions, Liu (2000) and Yang (2012) highlight learners' agency and the dynamic evolution of identity across contexts.

Building on this perspective, Xiao and Chen (2012) analysed Eastern Asian students’ academic achievement, mental health, social network, and cultural identity, and discovered that these

students were bicultural or multicultural, which helped to boost their cultural adaptation while residing in China. Similarly, by investigating international students' different cultural backgrounds, Shi (2017) discovered that the original background deeply impacted their cultural adaptation. International students who came from countries where the culture was close to Chinese culture would accept Chinese culture faster, and most of them chose to come to China to learn Chinese because of their interest in Chinese language and culture (Shi, 2017). These findings reinforce the need to consider the individual agency and variability inherent in identity negotiations.

Jiao (2008) argued that cultural identity consisted not only of engagement with the target culture, but also of acceptance of a different culture. Chen (2015), from the standpoint of identity and Chinese academic writing, discovered that the linguistic and strategic performances of language learners' academic writing showed development in stages. The reason for this was that the ability to apply a language was influenced by the individual and social characteristics involved in the development of identity (Chen, 2015). Apart from these studies, there is research related to identity and teaching methodology which shows that teachers should design their curriculum to accommodate students' different cultural backgrounds and personal experiences, while demonstrating respect for the students' cultures in the classroom. For instance, teaching materials should be carefully selected based on students' cultures to make them more accessible, and students should be encouraged to express their opinions as much as possible in class (Wang, 2000; Xie, 2009; Zhou, 2012; Zhu, 2008). These studies suggest that fostering an environment of respect and validation can significantly enhance both linguistic and identity development among Chinese language learners.

From the research described above, it can be seen that identity research in the SLA of Chinese has increased in recent years. However, the publications were still very limited, with quantitative research still playing the dominant role. Meanwhile, the research topic was narrow in scope, being mostly focused on the cultural or cross-cultural perspective (Zhou, 2020). This restricts the possible view of the different aspects of identity that might be impacted by studying abroad such as the shift of identity through studying Chinese in China.

However, while much attention has been paid to international students learning Chinese as a foreign language, a parallel but distinct body of research has emerged focusing on heritage learners — individuals who, though raised in predominantly non-Chinese environments, possess familial or community ties to the Chinese language and culture. The identity negotiations of these learners reveal unique dynamics, distinct from those of non-heritage learners, and warrant careful examination.

4.2. Heritage Learners of Chinese

Outside China, some research has been published on identity and learning Chinese by foreign citizens of Chinese origin, who learn Chinese as a heritage language, examining their Chinese learning motivation and their sense of self when becoming a Chinese language speaker (Duff et al., 2013; Li & Duff, 2008; Zhu, 2016).

According to Li and Duff (2008), unlike the non-heritage learners, heritage learners already have, or at least have experienced, access to Chinese language and Chinese culture at home or in the local Chinese community, which is an inevitable influence on their learning about the languages and culture. However, such influence is limited, since it is often not formalised learning of Chinese in a classroom, and their spoken and written Chinese might be weaker (Li & Duff, 2008) compared with their listening comprehension (Zhang, 2019). Nevertheless, home is still the major resource enabling heritage learners to practise Chinese. Such influence might be rejected or resisted, rather than accepted, when heritage speakers grew up, especially when the wider community's language (such as English) had become the dominant language for them. Shin's research (2010) showed that in some Korean-Chinese families, even though both parents were Chinese native speakers, they were reluctant to speak Chinese with their children – the heritage learners – due to social pressure or other reasons since young people may not want to stand out as different from their friends (Shin, 2009).

The possible desire of heritage speakers to learn Chinese is based on the wish to find a sense of belonging connected to their ethnic background, to form a desired aspect of their identity linked to their heritage (Comanaru & Noels, 2009), and to connect with the past (Duff et al., 2013). This desire to reconnect with one's heritage identity has been empirically examined in some quantitative research. Comanaru and Noels (2009) conducted a large-scale quantitative study involving 145 heritage learners of Chinese, using survey instruments grounded in Self-Determination Theory. Their findings indicated that intrinsic and identified motivations were significantly associated with learners' investment in maintaining and developing their Chinese proficiency. This research provides valuable empirical evidence on how identity-related motivations operate among heritage learners and highlights the complex interplay between ethnic background, personal agency, and language learning commitment.

While quantitative evidence enriches the understanding of motivational patterns, qualitative studies have further illuminated the challenges heritage learners face in navigating their dual identities. Even when the context in which heritage learners study Chinese presents many obstacles, it is confirmed that, compared with non-heritage learners, the heritage learners show more respect for Chinese history and society, and even feel that they are in a contradictory position as learners (Li & Duff, 2008). This is because heritage learners may have already acquired a certain understanding and recognition of Chinese language and culture under the influence of their families or the Chinese community before entering their classes. As a result, they tend to show more respect and acceptance than non-heritage learners do. On the other hand, their own cultural identity, which may even involve some prejudices, may diverge from what they learn in the classroom, creating a sense of contradiction (Li & Duff, 2008).

Research on heritage learners provides rich data about their special features, which also highlights the differences between heritage and non-heritage learners, and encourages further investigation into the motivation and sense of self of non-heritage learners of Chinese (Duff et al., 2013).

4.3. Comparative Discussion: Identity Negotiation Among Non-Heritage and Heritage Learners

While both non-heritage and heritage learners of Chinese engage in complex identity negotiations during their language learning journeys, the nature and trajectory of these negotiations exhibit significant differences. Non-heritage learners, often without prior exposure to Chinese culture, typically undergo a process of bicultural or multicultural adaptation. Through engagement with the Chinese linguistic and cultural environment, they develop new facets of identity, expanding their existing cultural repertoires (Xiao & Chen, 2012; Shi, 2017). Their identity shifts tend to be additive, characterised by an exploration of, and gradual affiliation with, Chinese cultural practices and values.

In contrast, heritage learners begin their Chinese learning with an existing, albeit sometimes tenuous, connection to Chinese language and culture. Their identity work involves a more intricate negotiation between their inherited cultural frameworks and the formal cultural narratives encountered in structured learning environments (Li & Duff, 2008; Comanaru & Noels, 2009). Rather than simply acquiring new cultural dimensions, heritage learners frequently experience internal contradictions: a tension between their familial cultural assumptions and the standardised or idealised forms of Chinese culture presented in educational settings. This sense of contradiction may result in oscillations between affirmation of heritage identity and critical distance from it.

Moreover, motivational orientations differ between the two groups. Non-heritage learners are largely driven by personal interest, professional aspirations, or intercultural curiosity. Heritage learners, by contrast, often view their engagement with Chinese as a means of reclaiming, affirming, or reinterpreting their ethnic identity. Thus, while non-heritage learners' identity trajectories are marked by cultural acquisition and adaptation, heritage learners' paths are shaped by processes of cultural re-connection, negotiation, and, at times, conflict.

These divergent identity pathways underline the importance of nuanced pedagogical approaches that are sensitive to learners’ differing backgrounds, motivations, and identity positions. Further research integrating longitudinal and mixed-methods designs is needed to capture the evolving identity constructions among both heritage and non-heritage learners in a globalising world.

5. Conclusion

This critical review highlights the multifaceted and dynamic nature of identity in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, shaped by an interplay of psychological factors and sociocultural environments. The literature demonstrates that SLA contexts profoundly influence identity construction and reconstruction, particularly among adult migrants, foreign language classroom learners, and study abroad participants. Learners' sense of self is shown to be continually negotiated in response to evolving cultural, linguistic, and power dynamics.

Special attention has been devoted to learners of Chinese as both a second and a heritage language. While research in this area has grown, existing studies predominantly concentrate on cultural adaptation, often overlooking broader dimensions of identity such as linguistic, relational, and digital identities. Furthermore, methodological approaches have tended to be narrow in scope, lacking longitudinal depth, interdisciplinary integration, and sensitivity to the increasingly digital learning environments in which identity negotiations now occur.

To address these limitations, future research should adopt more comprehensive and context-sensitive methodologies. Longitudinal case studies would allow for the tracking of identity transformations over extended periods, while multimodal discourse analysis and digital ethnography could capture the layered and multimodal nature of contemporary identity practices. Specific research tools such as language diaries, self-reflective journals, and classroom discourse analysis are recommended to enrich data sources and offer more nuanced insights into learners' evolving identity positions.

Moreover, the findings suggest practical pedagogical implications. Teachers should operationalise identity-aware practices by incorporating translanguaging strategies, allowing learners to mobilise their full linguistic repertoires in the classroom. Culturally responsive teaching materials that validate and reflect students' diverse backgrounds are also crucial in fostering inclusive learning environments where identity exploration is supported rather than constrained. Encouraging critical discussions about culture, language, and belonging can further empower learners to negotiate their identities with greater agency.

Finally, the growing prevalence of online learning environments demands closer attention to digital identity formation. Platforms such as Zoom-based Chinese language classes create new spaces for identity performance, hybridisation, and even resistance. Future research should examine how virtual interactional settings shape learners' perceptions of linguistic legitimacy, cultural belonging, and relational dynamics.

In sum, advancing SLA identity research, particularly within Chinese language learning, requires both methodological innovation and pedagogical reflexivity. Addressing the multidimensional, digitalised, and socially mediated nature of identity will enable scholars and practitioners alike to better support the complex journeys of contemporary language learners.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M. L.; methodology, M. L.; software, M. L.; validation, M. L.; formal analysis, M. L.; investigation, M. L.; resources, M. L.; data curation, M. L.; writing—original draft preparation, M. L.; writing—review and editing, M. L.; visualization, M. L.; supervision, M. L.; project administration, M. L.; funding acquisition, M. L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript..

Funding:

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

Not applicable.

Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank the University of Edinburgh for providing academic support, as well as Dr Lorna Hamilton and Dr Michael Lynch for their valuable feedback and help in revising the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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