



A Survey on International Students' Cognition and Attitude towards Chinese Culture in Xi'an

—Taking Northwestern Polytechnical University as an Example

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Abstract

Chinese learners' cognition and attitude towards Chinese culture are an important factor in measuring the effectiveness of cultural dissemination in China, and also an important indicator of the quality of Chinese language teaching at present. In this paper, we take Xi'an international students as our research object, and start from the channels through which they learn about Chinese culture, their knowledge of Chinese culture, and their attitudes towards Chinese culture. Through questionnaires, we choose traditional festivals, traditional food, and Chinese characteristics as the factors to be examined. We examined Xi'an international students' knowledge of and attitudes towards Chinese culture, explored the influence of learning level on knowledge and attitudes. The results were found: International students have an overall positive attitude towards Chinese culture. International students' knowledge of different aspects of Chinese culture varies, and their knowledge of Chinese culture remains at a superficial level.

Subject Areas

Education

Keywords

International Students, Chinese Culture, Attitude

1. Introduction

With the development of economic globalisation, the number of international students coming to China is increasing, and more and more of them come to Xi'an to study. Foreign students play an important role in promoting the dissemination

of Chinese culture and are an important group in promoting “Chinese culture going out”. Therefore, it is especially necessary to conduct research on foreign students’ knowledge, attitude and evaluation of Chinese culture. In my teaching practice in Northwestern Polytechnic University, the main targets of Chinese language teaching are international students. In the process of teaching practice, the author finds that for these international students, learning Chinese is not only about learning language knowledge, but also about understanding the culture of the target language. The survey on international students’ perception of and attitude towards Chinese culture in Northwestern Polytechnical University not only helps to consider the effectiveness of teaching Chinese as a second language, but also has important guiding significance for the practice of cultural teaching. In the field of teaching Chinese as a second language, we can see that the followings are some of the most important issues.

2. Subject and Methodology of the Study

The object of the investigation of this study is the international students in Xi’an to the Northwestern Polytechnical University. Among them, B3 and D1 are the main research classes. A total of 81 questionnaires were distributed, 78 valid questionnaires were returned, with an effective rate of 96%, and on-site interviews were conducted with 10 international students. This study mainly adopts a questionnaire survey method, which consists of three parts: The first part investigates the basic information of the respondents, such as nationality, gender, age, reasons for coming to China, and the main channels of daily contact with Chinese culture; the second part investigates the respondents’ knowledge of food culture, architectural culture, festival culture, customs and traditions, and traditional Chinese unification talents; and the third part investigates the overall attitudes and analyses of the respondents towards Chinese culture.

3. Research Content and Analysis

3.1. Analysis of Research Subjects

The target group of this paper is mainly international students from Northwestern Polytechnical University (NPU), and according to the questionnaire survey, most of the international students come from Central Asia. Most of them have no experience in learning Chinese before coming to China. In the first year of coming to NWUT, they need to finish the preparatory course in the International Chinese Language Institute. In the second year, they apply for majors and enter undergraduate. The studies of the 78 valid questionnaires specific respondent information from the volume survey are listed below:

“**Table 1**” shows that the proportion of men was 79.4 per cent and women 19.8 per cent.

In teM most of the matriculants had not learnt Chinese before coming to China, and the time they came to China was roughly the same as the time they spent on Chinese language learning. Among them, the D1 students and B1 students of

Northwestern Polytechnical University have been in China for almost less than a year. “Table 2” shows that 46.2% of the students have been in China for less than a year. Less than 8.9 per cent have studied Chinese for more than two years. In the interviews, pre-college students who had studied Chinese for more than 2 years were interviewed. Most of them said they had been to China before and interrupted their studies due to the epidemic. After everything resumed regularisation in China, they resumed their preparatory studies.

Table 1. Gender of respondents.

Gender of respondents	Quantity	Proportions
Male	62	79.4%
Female	16	19.8%

Table 2. Length of time spent learning Chinese.

Length of time spent learning Chinese	Quantity	Proportions
1 - 6 months	23	29.5%
7 - 12 months	36	46.2%
1 - 2 years	12	15.4%
more than 2 years	7	8.9%

According to Lambert and Gardner (1972), language attitude consists of three components: cognition component, affective component and active component [1]. The cognitive component includes the individual’s understanding and perception of a certain language; the affective component includes the emotions that are attached to the use of the language; and the active component includes the individual’s volitional actions towards the use of the language. Accordingly, this study examines Xi’an international students’ language attitudes towards Chinese language mainly from the attitudes towards Chinese language learning and use. The question “Do you think Chinese is difficult to learn?” used a five-point scale to analyse learners’ attitudes towards Chinese. The options were categorised into five items: “difficult”, “relatively difficult”, “not too difficult”, “not difficult”, “can’t say”, and “difficult to learn”. The results are as follows.

Table 3. Degree of difficulty in Chinese language learning.

Degree of difficulty in Chinese language learning	Quantity	Proportions
Difficult	6	7.7%
Relatively difficult	30	38.5%
Not difficult	24	30.8%
Not too difficult	14	17.9%
Can’t say	5	6.4%

From the above “**Table 3**”, we can see that 7.7% of the international students think that Chinese is difficult, 38.5% think that Chinese is relatively difficult. 30.8% think that it is not difficult to learn Chinese, among which 18 of this group of students are from the intermediate class of Northwestern Polytechnic University, who have higher Chinese language proficiency themselves.

3.2. Analysis of the Channels for Xi’an International Students to Understand Chinese Culture

Nowadays, through which channel do you mainly learn about China? The options are multiple choice questions, set the following options. “**Table 4**” shows that 61.73% learnt about Chinese culture through taking Chinese language classes, 34.57% learnt about Chinese culture through social media software, 17.28% learnt about Chinese culture through international students’ cultural activities. 35.8% learnt about Chinese culture through classmates and friends, and others.

Table 4. Channels for learning about China.

Channels for learning about China	Quantity	Proportions
Chinese lessons	50	61.73%
Social media	28	34.57%
Cultural activities	14	17.28%
Classmates or friends	30	35.8%

In the interviews, most of the international students said that there are fewer cultural activities in the school, and that Chinese language classes are an important way for students to learn about Chinese culture, in addition to this, we conducted a survey on the media used by international students, as shown in the “**Table 4**”: We can see that apart from Chinese language classes, which are the main channels for international students to get in touch with Chinese culture, Chinese films, Chinese songs and short videos are also part of the way for international students to get to know Chinese culture, and from this figure, it can be seen that international students are more inclined to choose interesting films, songs and books to learn more about Chinese culture.

3.3. Analysis of Xi’an International Students’ Cognition of Chinese Culture

The survey on the overall cognition of Chinese culture can roughly reflect Xi’an international students’ basic understanding of Chinese culture. However, due to the complexity of the Chinese cultural system, it is a matter of opinion as to what kind of cultural content should be chosen as a representative symbol of Chinese culture as a whole. The author follows two basic principles in the selection: firstly, the cultural content should be typical, it should be a typical representative symbol of Chinese culture; secondly, it should have differences in cognitive difficulty, not only to avoid the situation of “everyone knows”, but also to prevent the situation

of “no one knows”, that is, to reflect the differences in cognitive level and the differences in cultural content. Secondly, there should be a difference in cognitive difficulty to avoid the situation of “everyone knows” and “no one knows”, *i.e.*, to reflect the cognitive difference and hierarchy. Based on this, this study selected “food culture”, “architectural culture”, “Chinese festivals”, “traditional Chinese arts”, “traditional Chinese culture” and “traditional Chinese culture”. Chinese traditional arts” and “Chinese traditional costumes”.

In terms of food culture, as shown in “Table 5”, the questionnaire was set to ask “What traditional Chinese food do you know?” The largest proportion of international students chose dumplings, followed by zongzi, and lastly yuanxiao and laiba congee.

Table 5. Chinese food.

Chinese food	Quantity	Proportions
Dumplings	72	87.65%
Yuanxiao	15	18.52%
Zongzi	32	30.51%
Laba Congee	9	11.1%
Other	20	24.69%

The reasons for the above situation may be, on the one hand, that some international students have not been in China for a long time and the cultural knowledge they have learnt in the classroom has not touched on the part of food, and on the other hand, they may have less knowledge of some customs and habits of traditional festivals. For example, there is less knowledge about what food is eaten on some traditional festivals. It is concluded that although many students show their love for Chinese food, on the whole, most of them do not have a high level of knowledge about Chinese food culture.

In terms of architectural culture, the questionnaire provided the following options in the questionnaire “Which of the following famous buildings do you know?”

Table 6. Chinese buildings.

Chinese building	quantity	proportions
The limperial Palace	31	7.7%
The Great Wall	72	87.65%
Terra Cotta Warriors	49	59.76%
The Oriental Pearl Tower	18	21.95%
Canton Tower	27	32.93%
Suzhou Gardens	14	17%

“Table 6” shows that the largest proportion of people knew about the Great Wall (87.65%), followed by the Terracotta Warriors and the Forbidden City. The reason for the above situation is, on the one hand, that the Great Wall is located in Beijing, which is the capital city of China, and the teacher often mentions it in class, and it is easy to use the Great Wall of Beijing as an example when talking about the topic of tourism. On the other hand, because the target of the survey is basically international students in Xi’an, so they know more about the famous places and monuments in Xi’an.

Table 7. Chinese traditional festivals.

Chinese traditional festivals	Quantity	Proportions
Spring Festival	73	88.89%
Lantern Festival	37	45.12%
Tomb Sweeping Day	30	36.51%
Dragon Boat Festival	47	57.32%
Chinese Valentine’s Day	35	42.69%
Mid-Autumn Festival	40	48.78%

In terms of traditional festivals, the questionnaire provides six options in the question “Do you know which traditional festivals in China?”: Chinese New Year, Lantern Festival, Qingming Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Tanabata Festival, and Mid-Autumn Festival. From the data in the table below, “Table 7” shows that the highest recognition rate of traditional Chinese festivals is the Spring Festival, accounting for 88.89%, followed by the Dragon Boat Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival. The lowest recognition rate is Qingming Festival. As the most important traditional festival in China, the Spring Festival has the highest cognition for international students in Xi’an, which is partly due to the cultural experience of Spring Festival for international students, where teachers lead students to make dumplings. On the other hand, Xi’an has a strong Chinese New Year atmosphere as the venue of the Chinese New Year Gala in 2024, so most Xi’an international students know about Chinese New Year.

The reason for the above situation is, on the one hand, that international students in Xi’an are in the cultural environment of the target language, where there is usually a corresponding holiday for traditional festivals, and teachers talk about some traditional festival culture. Besides, the strong festival atmosphere, international students will see some food about the festival and posters in shopping malls. On the other hand, because international students are more passionate about traditional Chinese culture, they take the initiative to learn about it. In the classroom, students will ask teachers about some festival customs. On the whole, international students are more fond of the customs of traditional Chinese culture.

3.4. Analysis of Xi’an Students’ Attitudes towards Chinese Culture

The relationship between learners’ attitudes towards the target language culture

and their learning effects is a subject of many opinions and hypotheses in the field of second language acquisition, among which scholars with a psychosocial viewpoint, as represented by Lambert and Gardner, believe that learners' attitudes towards the target language culture have an influence on their learning attitudes and learning effects: those who have positive attitudes towards the target language culture usually have more positive attitudes towards foreign language learning and better learning effects [2]. Attitudes towards foreign language learning are usually more positive, and the learning effect is also better. Ellis also pointed out in *Language Studies* that "attitudes towards the target language culture can have a significant impact on second language learning" [3]. We don't know how learners' attitude towards the target language culture affects their learning achievement, but it is undeniable that learners who have a positive attitude towards the target language culture are more likely to integrate into the target language environment and have a more positive attitude towards learning. This is more important for foreign language learners who are in the target language environment [4]. On the other hand, learners' attitudes towards the target language culture can also reflect the effect of cultural communication to a certain extent, and good cultural communication should not only be limited to letting the recipients know about the culture, but also letting them identify with the target language culture. Therefore, in addition to the study of Xi'an international students' knowledge of Chinese culture, we have also conducted a study of international students' attitudes towards Chinese culture.

Therefore, in addition to the study of Xi'an international students' knowledge of Chinese culture, we also studied their attitudes towards Chinese culture.

In the question of "I think Chinese culture is very attractive", 54.32% of the international students strongly agree with this viewpoint, while 7.41% disagree with this viewpoint. The reason for this phenomenon may be that a few international students have come to China for a short period of time and cannot adapt well to many new environments. A part of the students can neither speak Chinese nor English, but only their mother tongue, and the author interviewed these students. The author interviewed these students, who thought that the difference between Chinese food habits and culture and their own country's culture was big, and that they could not adapt to the new environment quickly because they had come to China for a short period of time.

At the level of behavioural culture, 49.38% of the students agreed with the questions "I want to experience Chinese Kung Fu" and "I want to celebrate traditional festivals". As international students are in the target language culture, they are deeply influenced by some traditional Chinese cultures and have learnt them by heart. However, in the question "I often watch Chinese TV dramas and I often listen to Chinese songs", only 29% or 63% of the international students agree with this view. The reason for this phenomenon is, on the one hand, that the Chinese film industry is not strong in cultural self-confidence, and the production of films is not as good as that of foreign countries. In the interviews with some international students, most of them preferred to watch films from Europe and America.

On the level of values and culture, in the title “I think young people should give up their seats for the elderly in buses”. The reason for this phenomenon is that when I asked some students in class, there is a certain similarity between the cultures of Central Asia.

On the whole, Xi’an international students have a high evaluation attitude towards Chinese culture, and generally think that Chinese culture is colourful and attractive. Most of the international students don’t like Chinese songs and TV dramas much, but they are more fond of Chinese architecture and food. Most of the international students have a better impression of China after coming to China. In terms of the attitudes of international students with different levels of Chinese language proficiency towards Chinese culture, as the level of study increases, their liking for China increases accordingly, but there is no obvious change in terms of values.

4. Conclusions

Culture is of great significance in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Language itself contains cultural factors, and in order to master a second language, it is necessary to learn the representative culture of the language at the same time [5]. Therefore, Chinese as a foreign language teaching should pay attention to cultural teaching, pay attention to students’ knowledge, attitude and evaluation of culture, take students’ interest as the guide, innovate teaching contents and forms. Based on the results of the above survey and analysis, the following recommendations are made for the teaching of Chinese language:

- 1) According to the interest degree of students, colleges and universities should offer more cultural courses.
- 2) Establish incentive mechanism for international students’ cultural learning to stimulate students’ learning motivation.
- 3) Build professional teaching team and improve teachers’ teaching ability.

Due to the author’s short teaching experience and limited academic ability, the analyses of this study are not perfect. In the future, the author will continue to improve his theoretical foundation and continue to improve this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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