Subject pronominal expression is a widely studied language feature in variationist sociolinguistics and has proven to be a well-established sociolinguistic variant (Ávila-Jiménez, 1996; Bayley & Pease-Alvarez, 1997; Cameron, 1993; Cameron & Flores-Ferrán, 2004; Flores-Ferrán, 2002; Hurtado, 2001; Jia & Bayley, 2002). To date, a substantial body of variation studies of this variant is on rich inflectional languages such as Spanish and Portuguese (Ávila-Jiménez, 1996; Bayley & Pease-Alvarez, 1996; Cameron, 1993; Lira, 1982), but few have been done on non-inflectional languages such as Chinese (Jia & Bayley, 2002; Author et al., 2012) and none on Chinese L2. This is the first variation study of subject pronoun use by CSL (Chinese as a second language) learners.

In Chinese, subjects may be expressed by overt or null pronouns. Adopting principles of variation analysis, this study aims to investigate the variation of subject pronominal expression in the speech of twenty-two CSL learners and compare with Chinese native speaker patterns (Author et al., 2012). Multivariate analysis of 14,071 tokens revealed that subject person/number and switch reference proved to have the strongest effects, followed by sentence type, native language, length of stay in China, proficiency level and gender. As native speakers, CSL learners’ subject pronoun use has the following general patterns, 1) Singular and +animate subjects tend to be associated with overt pronouns and plural and –animate ones with null; 2) Switch in subject surface form favors overt pronouns and no switch favors null; 3) Statements and questions slightly favor overt subject pronouns, while imperatives favor null; and 4) Females tend to use overt pronouns more than males do. In addition, 5) English and Russian speakers tend to favor overt subject expressions, while Korean and Japanese speakers favor null; 6) 3- or 4-year stay in China favor overt pronouns, 1-year in the middle, and 2-year favors null; and 7) Intermediate learners tend to use overt pronouns more than advanced learners do.