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CHINA'S LINGUISTIC FRONTIERS

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The City of a Thousand Minarets

Cairo (2013). Source: Holger Wirth (CC), [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/holgerwirth/)

A Chinese Conversation *Nādi* in Cairo: The Grassroots Popularity of Mandarin Chinese in the Middle East

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*Studies of the spread of Mandarin Chinese in the Middle East and beyond often highlight the leading role the Chinese and other states assume in it. However, contributing to the globalisation of Mandarin and its adoption overseas are also humble grassroots initiatives. Using a Chinese conversation *nādi* ('club') in Cairo as a case study, this essay highlights the social tenacity and microconditions behind the popularity of Mandarin in the Middle East, showing how these are closely bound up with individual extralinguistic experiences of a sense of community and camaraderie with fellow learners and instructors.*

It was a Friday in early June 2024, one hour after the *Salat al-Jumu'ah* prayer. The only thing as intense as the ultraviolet radiation was the hustle and bustle of El-Abasseyia Square, one of the busiest public transport hubs in Greater Cairo. At one edge of the square, two bulky buildings shielded the alley between them from the hubbub, harsh sunlight, and heat.

Lutfi, Asma, Maged, Abdo, and I stood outside the locked gate of one of the buildings. Our focus was on the four-syllable Chinese phrase on Abdo's T-shirt: *lairi fangchang* (来日方长, literally, 'future days are long'). The characters were arranged in a square shape. How to read it? Vertically or horizontally? Starting from the right or the left? Abdo had no idea, which might be justified by the fact that at that time he was just a freshman in the Chinese Department at Cairo University. As recent graduates in the same major from Ain Shams University and Suez Canal University, respectively, Lutfi and Asma uttered the four characters correctly but in the wrong sequence and without grasping the meaning. Maged, who had started learning Mandarin from scratch in his spare time a few months earlier, kept silent, all the while showing indifference to the language quiz I improvised. He was an engineer in an agency that imported machinery from China to sell locally.

While I was explaining to them the meaning and usage of *lairi fangchang*, a staff member of the property management company appeared with the key to the locked gate. Asma, who was next to me, immediately said to me in Chinese: 'I am quarrelling with him' (我要和他吵架), which, I soon understood, was just an exaggeration to express her anger about us having to wait so long. We had gathered there for the weekly

Mandarin courses offered by Triple C, a private Chinese-language centre. Asma was the course instructor and Lutfi the centre's founder and boss. After briefly reprimanding the property management company staffer for failing to fulfil his duty, Asma entered the classroom, turned on the airconditioner, and opened the PDF on her laptop. It was the teaching material she and Lutfi had prepared.

As the only students in the basic Mandarin course, Abdo and Maged enjoyed what small class sizes could offer: Asma gave them one-on-one attention, patiently correcting their pronunciation of each character and asking them to repeat until they could get it right. Lutfi sat a few desks away from Abdo and Maged, his eyes on the screen of his laptop. He was busy with a gig of his own: he was designing a logo for a soon-to-open Chinese restaurant in Maadi, a vibrant suburban area in Cairo. On and off, he partook in correcting the two students' pronunciation of some characters, though his pronunciation and tone were not always correct to the ear of a native Chinese speaker like me.

About an hour later, someone from outside pushed the classroom door open and then quickly closed it. Students in a different class on basic Mandarin conversation were beginning to arrive but, as the class I was sitting in had been delayed, they had to wait for about 40 minutes outside. After the first class was dismissed, Maged stayed on, as did I. For Farooq, a student in the second class, it was a happy surprise to see me again after my first visit to them the previous week. Compared with other Triple C members, Farooq's education afforded him unique access to, and an intimate bond with, China. As part of an undergraduate exchange program in engineering, he had spent a year at Nanjing University of Science and Technology. Upon graduating in 2023, he had joined the Egyptian branch of China Railway Construction Corporation, a Chinese state-owned multinational. As an engineer, he spent most of his working time at construction sites. He wanted to learn some Mandarin so he could directly communicate technical issues with his Chinese colleagues, who spoke only Chinese.

At a distance from the male students, three women in their mid-twenties sat side by side. They had come together to try studying Mandarin at this centre. While all were focused on their own mobile screens and reading after Asma, Khaled, a doctor working full-time for the Fayoum Hospital, came in. No-one was distracted by his late arrival. He wished to pursue further education in medicine outside Egypt and hoped to get into a Chinese university given that it was much easier to get scholarships there compared with Western universities. To be eligible to apply for a scholarship, however, he had to learn Mandarin to pass a language test. Hence, in addition to studying online, he spent three hours on a bus to Cairo every Friday to take the offline language course at Triple C.

There was another member of the class, who was absent that afternoon: a native Chinese speaker who usually worked in tandem with the local instructors as a teaching assistant. His role was to correct students' pronunciation, conduct mock job interviews in Chinese, and lead the course on Chinese culture. Lutfi had posted job ads on a

Chinese-language mobile app that provided information and services for overseas Chinese. Several Chinese Muslim students studying at local Arabic-language training centres or universities had applied for this part-time job, which was paid by the session.

A Space for Communicative Mandarin

In studying the spread of Mandarin in the Middle East and beyond, scholars often highlight the leading role the Chinese and other states assume in it. This is best exemplified by the discussions on the expansion of the Confucius Institutes in the region (Sari 2017; Yellinek et al. 2020; Chai 2021), the incorporation of Mandarin in the curriculum of Saudi public schools and Kuwait's education system (Al Ansari 2022; Al Roomy 2022; Sang et al. 2024), and the implementation of the United Arab Emirates' 'Hundred Schools Project' (Lin 2024; Jin and Charles 2024). Much of this scholarship echoes the fact that '[t]he state-level initiatives constitute not only the effective grounds but also the seemingly solid pedagogical and ideological infrastructures for promoting Chinese among locals in the region' (Wang 2022).

Contributing to the globalisation of Mandarin and its adoption overseas, however, are also humble grassroots initiatives, such as Triple C in Cairo. Drawing from my field notes about this centre in 2024, I hope to direct the reader's attention to spaces of private Mandarin training and learning. These spaces are significant because they open a window on to the social tenacity and microconditions that lie behind the popularity of Mandarin, which are closely bound up with individual extralinguistic experiences of a sense of community and camaraderie among fellow language learners and instructors.

Across today's Middle East, Mandarin's economic value is a socially accepted, powerful truth. By this, I mean two interrelated things. First, there is increasing awareness that Mandarin is an important language in global trade (Loh 2023); and second, proficiency in Mandarin provides a type of human capital useful to pursue promising job prospects and opportunities for free training and higher education in Chinese universities. That capital is measured and standardised in the technical linguistic sense through the official Chinese Proficiency Test, the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (汉语水平考试), most commonly known by its acronym, HSK. Many Chinese employers and all Chinese universities demand prospective job and scholarship applicants to have a *HSK* certificate of a certain level (usually Level 5 of the nine levels, for which candidates must have a vocabulary of 2,500 basic Chinese words). This demand accounts for, and gives rise to, the second reality: that the Mandarin Chinese training economy has been thriving in recent years—a sector that mainly monetises HSK cram training and crash courses on tourist Mandarin. This is particularly true in Egypt (Wang 2023).

One crucial index of the value of Mandarin Chinese as human capital is the ability to use the language to communicate. This means that it is important to also learn its colloquial forms—something about which Lutfi was aware. He knew that high-income jobs in Egypt, such as tour guides for Chinese tourist groups and Chinese–Arabic interpreters for Chinese companies, require and prioritise Mandarin speaking proficiency. But the training that Chinese programs in universities offer disappointed him. He called the Mandarin Chinese that students learnt at university ‘academic Mandarin’—a language learnt through and for reading Chinese literature and materials on Chinese history and culture, which was a skill in which he had no desire to excel. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the only native Chinese-speaking teacher in his department returned to China. Lutfi and his classmates spontaneously gathered on a regular basis to practise Mandarin by speaking it with each other. This experience was a watershed moment for him, as it was then that he came up with the idea to open a Mandarin centre to fill what he saw as a gap. He called it ‘Triple C’ from the abbreviation for ‘Chinese Conversation Club’.

In-Class Extralinguistic Experiences

Triple C introduces itself on its Facebook page as ‘the first Chinese conversation *nādi* [club] in Egypt’ (Triple C 2022). *Nādi* is an old Arabic word that originally meant ‘a place prepared for people to sit together’. In today’s Egypt, it refers to associations that organise social, cultural, and entertainment activities that people pay a membership fee to join. Triple C charges each person 750 EGP (roughly equivalent to 17 USD) for six 90-minute in-class sessions on Friday afternoons and an unlimited online Q&A service.

The *nādi* modality of Mandarin training highlights the link between the learning experience and interactions with, and support from, fellow students and instructors. In private Mandarin centres, bosses, local instructors, Chinese teaching assistants, and students are not in hierarchical relationships. Usually aged in their twenties and early thirties, they not only share interests and concerns, but also demand a medium for self-improvement, which Mandarin training centres such as Triple C provide. Students’ motivations to study Chinese differ, but all are career related. As for the instructors and prospective job applicants—many of whom are recent female graduates of Chinese departments and Chinese Muslim students—what they most care about is not how much they will be paid, but rather whether the work experience and the time devoted to it will benefit their career planning.

Asma’s case is representative. She failed at a job interview with the China–Egypt TEDA Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone. The human resources manager told her that her Mandarin was good, but she lacked other skills. When Lutfi, who was her Facebook friend at the time, invited her to work for Triple C as a course instructor,



she accepted it in the belief that this work experience could be a way to improve and prove her skills. The monthly salary was lower than the average salary for local Chinese-language graduates, but satisfactory for her. She needed to work only three days a week: every Friday afternoon she commutes between Suez and Cairo, then there are two days of remote working.

Courses at Triple C emphasise the practical dimension of Mandarin, prioritising speaking skills over reading and writing. To do this, instructors favour interactive methods involving bidirectional communication between themselves and the students. At Triple C, in-class interaction includes asking and answering questions, correcting one another, and repeating. Anyone in the classroom is welcome to ask about, explain, or correct meanings, tones, pronunciation, and usage of characters and expressions they are learning. The interactions surrounding specific linguistic points are unlikely to lead to deeper discussions, as students simply aim to digest the contents of their learning materials, which are basic words and short sentences. But the spontaneous and active participation in the classroom created

Learning Chinese Calligraphy

Egyptian students watch a demonstration of Chinese calligraphy. Source: [Chinese Cultural Center](#).

a relaxing and supportive environment, thanks to which the course ensured that the linguistic questions students raised were answered in a satisfactory and timely manner, without leaving anyone behind.

All the students to whom I talked told me the reason they preferred Triple C to the Confucius Institute and online courses is that the small class size provides in-person guidance and personalised support to each one of them for an affordable price. This preference suggests that what they expected from the *nādi* was not professional and rigorous language training, but rather more time, attention, and care from the instructors. The interesting point here is that the students did not feel they were in competition with the others over limited in-class time and resources. Instead, they considered themselves part of a collective that shared a common interest. It is this collective atmosphere that provides individuals with support, confidence, and opportunities to practise speaking Chinese.

For example, job interview practice is the most popular and advanced course at the club. Students in this course are often graduates or senior students enrolled in Chinese departments at Egyptian universities. The instructors conduct mock interviews with them one by one. Although a long list of questions was shared with the students beforehand, their performance revealed the inadequacy of the training in conversational Mandarin they received at their universities. They had to choose between giving simple answers at the expense of expressing elaborate ideas or giving long answers that could suffer from incorrect word choice and grammar. Lutfi and his Chinese assistant corrected only a couple of linguistic mistakes each time, and then encouraged the student to adjust the answer and repeat it. When the students paused because they were unable to immediately think of a word, everyone waited patiently. If the pause lasted a bit longer, Lutfi or other students would propose a word so the interview could continue. Each mock interview ended with applause and nodding.

A Beacon of Hope

The popularity of Mandarin training and learning overseas is commonly referred to in both common parlance and scholarship as ‘Mandarin fever’ (汉语热). Top-down approaches to this phenomenon foreground political economy as a key mechanism shaping Arab countries’ incorporation of Mandarin in their foreign-language policies in recent years, and locals’ receptive attitude towards this language. They inform us of the context and basis of this ‘fever’. However, as this essay has pointed out, it is important not to overlook how grassroots initiatives in Mandarin training are where this passion is generated and sustained.

The case of Triple C shows that some young Egyptians view Mandarin as a language of hope, which is the real reason behind ‘Mandarin fever’. For Lutfi, running a language *nādi* represents the start of productive entrepreneurship. (At the time of drafting this

essay in September 2024, he had rented several classrooms and expanded his business.) For Asma, teaching Mandarin allows her ample time to explore and develop skills towards a more fulfilling future. For Khaled, learning Mandarin is a way to maintain hope and pursue his dreams of continuing higher education in medicine; for Farooq and Maged, it is another step in their pursuit of self-improvement; and for Abdo, it means a bigger slice of the potential pie offered by Egypt's increasingly intense collaboration with China. Will spoken Mandarin proficiency benefit them in the job market? The answer is highly uncertain, given the competitiveness of that market. Yet, harbouring goals and hope, young locals refuse to stay put and continue to dream of a better future. Grassroots spaces such as Triple C are where they take steps forward. ●

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