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CHINA'S LINGUISTIC FRONTIERS

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Anniversary

Zimbabwean students celebrating the Confucius Institute Anniversary on the University of Zimbabwe campus. Source: University of Zimbabwe.

Confucius Institutes and the Spread of Mandarin Chinese in Africa

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The rapid growth of Confucius Institutes (CIs) has sparked widespread debates about the way these institutions operate and the role they play in shaping local politics in relation to China. This essay examines the spatiality and temporality of CIs and their role in the spread of Mandarin Chinese in Africa. Drawing on insights from the CI at the University of Zimbabwe, the author argues that the deployment of such institutions by the Chinese Communist Party should be read as a strategic approach to manufacturing consent through forging real and perceived convivial networks for Chinese-language learning.

On 10 March 2023, the Confucius Institute (CI) at Zimbabwe's oldest and premier university, the University of Zimbabwe, celebrated its fifteenth anniversary with glitz and fun. Dressed in Chinese costumes, students sang in Chinese and displayed various forms of Chinese art and culture, highlighting their linguistic competencies. The fusion of Chinese and Shona in the songs and other performances foregrounded the convivial cultural exchanges and cooperation between the two countries. Outstanding local students received rewards for excelling in their mastery of Chinese language and culture during the 'Chinese Bridge' and 'My Story with China' competitions, which involved Chinese singing, dancing, martial arts, and acting, among other skills. At the conclusion of this celebration, a memorandum was signed between officials from the Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe, the University of Zimbabwe, and Vice-President of Renmin University of China, Du Peng, to introduce Mandarin teaching from primary school to university level. In fact, as of April 2022, about 16 countries in Africa had incorporated Chinese language into their national education systems, and about 30 universities had established Chinese majors (Sawahel 2023). This is part of the mandatory inclusion of Mandarin learning in primary and secondary schools in these African countries. This trend clearly indicates the growing importance of the Chinese language across the African continent, and in Zimbabwe specifically.

In fact, at the University of Zimbabwe, more than 16,000 students have learned Chinese at the CI since its establishment in 2007 (Huaxia 2023). Speaking at the fifteenth anniversary celebrations, the Vice-President of Renmin University of China asserted that: 'The institute is not only a platform for language learning and cultural exchanges, but also plays an important role in promoting personnel exchanges and academic cooperation on a larger scale, to a higher level and in more fields' (Huaxia

2023; China.org 2023). The drive to establish and expand CIs in and beyond Zimbabwe is led by Hanban, an organisation that falls under China's Ministry of Education, which actively supports the teaching of Mandarin across the globe. Like elsewhere, the CI at the University of Zimbabwe was provided as a 'gift' from China to signal the growing strength of its bilateral relationship with Zimbabwe. Indeed, the Zimbabwean Government constructs China as an 'all-weather' friend whose support dates to the country's liberation struggle against the Rhodesian regime in the 1960s (Alao 2014; Abegunrin and Manyeruke 2020).

As early as 2013, the University of Zimbabwe CI was given a prestigious award at the annual international CI conference in Beijing for being the best CI in sub-Saharan Africa (Mashinga 2013; The Herald 2014; Saini and Zhou 2024). The award was recognition of its outstanding performance in teaching Chinese language and culture, as well as the training of local Chinese teachers and the promotion of student exchange. Interestingly, globally, the Zimbabwean Confucius Institute was the first to have local lecturers and, at the time of writing in late 2024, continues to have the highest number of local lecturers with master's or doctoral degrees from Chinese universities to teach Mandarin as a foreign language (Mashinga 2013; The Herald 2024). Many of these local lecturers enrolled in Chinese-language education programs thanks to financial support from the Chinese Government (Mashinga 2013). In southern Africa, Zimbabwe was the first to formally institutionalise the teaching of Chinese language and culture, in 2007. This included the establishment of a CI at the country's largest and premier university, the University of Zimbabwe, as well as the introduction of Confucius classrooms at several primary and secondary schools across the country. The University of Zimbabwe was the second in sub-Saharan Africa, after the University of Nairobi in Kenya, to establish a CI.

In this short essay, I focus on the growing dominance of the Chinese language in Africa, as well as the role of CIs at various African higher education institutions in asserting China's cultural and linguistic imprint on the continent, taking Zimbabwe as a key case study. I argue that the deployment of the CIs by the Chinese Communist Party should be read as a strategic approach to manufacturing consent through forging real and perceived convivial networks through various forms of cultural exchange and academic scholarships for Chinese-language learning. I also highlight how much of this strategy is grounded in the promise of employment and other economic benefits for local youth—opportunities that most often prove elusive.

The Future Lingua Franca

At a CI annual function in 2019, the University of Zimbabwe's Vice-Chancellor remarked that Mandarin was one of the languages of the future, its influence spurred by China's remarkable economic transformation (Mataire 2015; Steadman 2019). The

rise of China as a global economic and political powerhouse has been accompanied by a corresponding growth in the spread of its sociocultural influence, particularly the teaching of Mandarin in and beyond the African continent.

The establishment of the CI at the University of Zimbabwe came a few years after Zimbabwe strengthened its ties with China through the 2003 Look East Policy, which promoted the consolidation of economic and cultural ties between Beijing and Harare. China has since become one of Zimbabwe's largest bilateral trading partners (Gukurume and Matsika 2022) and has played a key role in the country's infrastructural development. Beyond economic ties, Zimbabwe and China have also strengthened their sociocultural and educational ties over the past few years.

The Zimbabwean CI is interesting for various reasons—for instance, it is regarded as a model CI not only in Africa, but also globally, having won several awards. Although it was the second to be established in sub-Saharan Africa, it was the first to offer a degree in Chinese language and the first to have local lecturers teaching Chinese (The Herald 2014; Mukeredzi 2017). It has also excelled in international Chinese language and culture competitions, with its students regularly performing well at the 'Chinese Bridge' and other events. In addition, it was the first to develop a Shona–Chinese dictionary, facilitating mutual communication and learning between speakers of Zimbabwe's main language and Chinese individuals interested in local language and culture. It has also branched out with more than 10 other subsidiary Chinese-language learning centres in various parts of the country, which offer Chinese-language proficiency tests. For all these reasons, the University of Zimbabwe CI offers an interesting case to explore the ways in which these institutions function as grassroots spaces for China's linguistic encounters with Zimbabwe and Africa at large.

A Part of the Chinese Ideological Apparatus?

For us to understand how the Chinese Party-State deploys the CIs globally and more specifically in Zimbabwe as an attempt to assert its cultural, linguistic, political, and ideological interests, we must draw on Louis Althusser's (1971) conceptualisation of ideology and ideological apparatus. For the French philosopher, ideological state apparatuses enable the dissemination of ideology in ways that accentuate the hegemonic dominance of specific ways of governing. In this case, CIs propagate not only Chinese language and culture, but also the world view, norms, values, and political philosophies of the Chinese Government and the Chinese Communist Party within and beyond Zimbabwe. Therefore, CIs have become important spaces through which locals encounter the broader cultural cosmology of the Chinese Party-State, as well as the Mandarin language.

The rapid spread of CIs and Chinese-language education in Africa and beyond has been variously interpreted. Many scholars have framed it as part of China's broader cultural diplomacy and 'soft power', as a strategy serving the broader geopolitical and economic interests of the Chinese authorities (Callahan 2016; Wang and Curdt-Christiansen 2016; Repnikova 2022). Some have observed how CIs are marked by unequal power dynamics and cultural exchange in which African agency is undermined and overlooked in everyday linguistic encounters (Xu 2024a, 2024b). These observers view such cultural exchange as fundamentally unequal, with the Chinese linguistic and cultural dominance foregrounded at the expense of local languages and cultures.

Where the higher education system is cash-strapped, which is often the case not only in developing countries such as Zimbabwe but also in the Global North, local universities end up over-depending on China's resources, which leads to unequal power dynamics (Franceschini and Loubere 2022). Consequently, academics and universities depending on Chinese funding may be compelled to produce knowledge, teach, and frame academic discourse that align with the Chinese Communist Party's narratives. This has raised concerns about the real or perceived suppression of academic freedom within campuses where CIs are established. These fears are echoed by Richey (2017), who asserts that the operations of CIs tend to inherently jeopardise the mission of institutions of higher learning and violate standards of academic freedom.

It is against this background that some scholars have asserted that global promotion of the Chinese language might have an underlying political agenda meant to cement the political and economic influence of China across the world (Gil 2021; Xu and Stahl 2021). In addition, Sishuwa Sishuwa (2017) has framed the spread of CIs in Africa as part of a broader cultural war on the continent between China and Western countries. In his view, the African cultural landscape has become a fiercely contested battlefield with the potential of undermining local languages, norms, and values, amounting to a new form of cultural colonisation (Sishuwa 2017). Critics have raised concerns that the CIs are being used as spaces for spying and as propaganda machinery for the Chinese Communist Party's political ideology. The growing worries about the operational dynamics of the CIs, as well as their alleged role in eroding academic freedom and boosting China's political influence, along with shifting public sentiments towards the Chinese Government, have led to the closure of some CIs at European and US universities (Franceschini and Loubere 2022).

However, even as some Western countries shut their CIs amid myriad criticisms and concerns, CIs in Africa have continued to grow, and enrolments have likewise surged significantly (Cha 2024; Li 2021, 2024). At the time of writing in late 2024, Africa was home to more than 60 CIs located within university campuses in various countries (Saini and Zhou 2024). Globally, there were more than 500 CIs working to advance the learning of Chinese language and culture (Li 2021, 2024; Xu 2024b).

A Language of Opportunity

University and CI officials often instrumentalise promises of generous funding, scholarships, and opportunities to regularly visit Chinese universities through exchange programs during orientation weeks, to entice first-year students to take up Chinese-language courses. Indeed, such incentives have proven successful and, over the years, the number of Zimbabwean students studying in China has grown significantly, thanks to generous funding for scholarships and bursaries provided by the Chinese Government.

As more Chinese companies invest in various sectors of the country's economy, learning Chinese has come to be framed as a strategy for enhancing employment opportunities for the country's youth, many of whom have been struggling to find jobs in a shrinking and fiercely competitive job market. Indeed, the Chinese representative at the fifteenth anniversary celebrations mentioned above noted that by learning Chinese, young Zimbabwean students would not only master a language tool but also expand their chances to realise their career dreams (Huaxia 2023). This resonates with observations in other African countries where the establishment of CIs on campuses is often perceived as a 'win-win' project benefiting both Chinese and the locals (Elusoji 2023; Lampert and Mohan 2014; see also Hubbert 2019). This view was echoed in a recent academic study by Saini and Zhou (2024), which asserted that the CIs in Zimbabwe have played a key role in developing talent through training and skills development, innovation, and cooperation, fostering mutual benefits for Harare and Beijing.

As youth unemployment has reached an unprecedented level due to the protracted economic crisis in the country, there has been a deliberate and growing investment in Chinese-language learning by many young Zimbabweans and their families, as well as by the government. Similarly, the University of Zimbabwe's executives consider China, as represented by the CIs, a springboard for institutional and technological advancement, with a bounty of opportunities for their staff and students. For instance, Paul Mapfumo, the current University of Zimbabwe Vice-Chancellor, has claimed:

Language plays an important role in advancing relations between the two countries. When our people are able to communicate effectively, they are able to explore areas of business, entrepreneurship, science, technology and innovation which are fundamental to the advancement of our modernization and industrialization agenda. (Huaxia 2023)

In this context, many young people view Chinese language as a form of symbolic 'linguistic currency' or capital that can be expended to access employment. Indeed, investment in learning Chinese is framed by both local and Chinese stakeholders as an avenue to enhance young people's market value in both current and imagined future communities. Many young people regard China as the new economic powerhouse and

therefore view proficiency in Mandarin as likely to unlock many opportunities. As one of my interlocutors, a Chinese-language student, said in an interview about their motivation to learn Mandarin: ‘Everything is now coming from China, and every country now looks up to China for goods and services.’ This was echoed by another student, who remarked: ‘If you paid close attention during the Covid-19 crisis, every country including the United States of America was buying ventilators and other things from China and the Chinese economic investments continue to spread globally.’

Elusive Employment Opportunities

Unfortunately, despite all the hype and expectations, these promises often prove elusive. While competence in Chinese languages widens young people’s employment opportunities, Chinese-language skills do not guarantee or translate into readily available jobs, as many Chinese companies prefer to use imported Chinese labour in their various investment projects (Repnikova 2022). Similarly, scholars have shown how Chinese companies operating in Africa tend to offer precarious forms of employment to both locals (Lee 2009; Xiaoyang 2016; Gukurume and Matsika 2022) and imported expatriate Chinese workers (Fei 2024). Worse still, meaningful job opportunities for African graduates in China are also scant, except for precarious English-teaching positions.

As such, the employment opportunities created by Chinese investors do not benefit people equally. In fact, Chinese investment in Zimbabwe and many other African countries has tended to benefit political and economic elites at the expense of ordinary people. This is echoed by many scholars who have highlighted how Chinese investments have been susceptible to local corruption (Isaksson and Kotsadam 2018; Culver 2021; Tawiah et al. 2022; Cha 2024). In the presence of endemic corruption, economic spillovers and local employment remain elusive. This finding resonates with Wegenast et al. (2019), who argued that Chinese firms are less likely to foster regional employment due to a competitive advantage in the employment of expatriate workers and a lower readiness to invest in local skill formation. Given all this, some scholars have pointed out that the geopolitical impact of CIs is far from even globally and tends to vary from place to place according to local circumstances (Yuan et al. 2016).

Interestingly, despite the seemingly limited employment and business opportunities, many Chinese-language students remain brazenly optimistic that their Chinese proficiency will unlock a better future for them. Their optimism is partly driven by the belief that increasing Chinese investment in Africa and globally will drive demand for Chinese-language translators and teachers, but it is also a material manifestation of the consent that is being manufactured by the CIs and other actors. For instance, one of my interlocutors, a Mandarin learner, noted that it would be only a matter of time before his investment in Chinese-language skills started paying off. In his own words: ‘You do not need to use rocket science to know that Chinese-language competency

and qualification will pay off, with the way China is investing globally, everyone will be demanding these skills.’ This optimism was shared by many of my interlocutors who believed that Chinese-language skills will become the most sought-after in the future.

A Language of the Future?

This essay has examined the ways in which the CIs in Africa are being used to boost Chinese soft power. It has revealed that while CIs are being shut in some US and European universities, in Africa, they are still thriving, growing in both student numbers and influence. This signals China’s strengthening soft power across the African continent and the growing appeal of Mandarin. The perception and construction of Mandarin as the language of the future are mediated by China’s rise as a global economic superpower and its massive investments in Africa, with all the associated promises of employment opportunities and prosperity for the local population. Yet, the article has also shown that these promises often fail to materialise, as these opportunities largely benefit political and economic elites. In this sense, the appeal of Mandarin Chinese remains more that of a language of the future rather than being anchored in the here and now. ●