

THE SPREAD OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA : THE ROLE OF THE CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE AT NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY

Ifeyinwa Emejulu¹; Anas Elochukwu²; Zhang Le³

¹Department of History & International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University

²Department of Chinese Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University

³The Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University

Abstract

One of the concomitants of China's emergence as a world power is the astronomical increase of interest in learning the Chinese language in both developed and developing countries. China has launched different strategies aimed at harnessing the increasing interest in its new status. One such strategy is the launch of its own language-cum-culture institute called the Confucius Institute (CI). CIs have played a leading part in the spread of the language since 2024 when the first CI was launched at Seoul National University. Today, millions are learning the language, including in those countries where the language, hitherto, was barely heard of. The two major reasons for the stunted spread of the language prior to the establishment of the CIs was the Cold War and China's prolonged exclusion from the WTO, the premier regulatory framework of global trade. The leading role played by the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University (CI-NAU) in the spread of the Chinese in Nigeria since its inception in 2008 is discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Chinese language, the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, spread

Introduction

Chinese (汉语; 汉语), which belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, is a group of languages spoken natively by the ethnic Han Chinese majority and many ethnic minorities in China (Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau) and by the Han diaspora in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. It has the largest number of native speakers (Zeidan, n.d.), being spoken in China by 1, 346, 000, 000 billion, Singapore by 3. 07 million, Malaysia by 6, 712, 200 million and Indonesia by 2, 832, 510 million. It is the official language of China (where it is spoken by 70% of the population), as well as one of the official languages of Singapore (where it is spoken by 38.6% of the population). As a macrolanguage, it has sixteen variants/vernaculars, which are: [Classical Chinese](#), [Gan Chinese](#), [Hakka Chinese](#), [Huizhou Chinese](#), [Jinyu Chinese](#), [Mandarin Chinese](#), [Min Bei Chinese](#), [Min Dong Chinese](#), [Min Nan Chinese](#), [Min Zhong Chinese](#), [Northern Pinghua](#), [Pu-Xian Chinese](#), [Southern Pinghua](#), [Wu Chinese](#), [Xiang Chinese](#) and [Yue Chinese](#) (Ethnologue, 2024). It is pictographic and ideographic. Its origins are murky, but some Chinese scholars believe that the earliest traces of

writing predate the Shang (the second dynasty) and can be found on the Neolithic pottery

fragments dating to 5 B.C. (Schirokauer, 2003). With the invention of writing by the Chinese by the end of 2 B.C., it became the first language to be printed. It is the largest language in the world when counting only first language (native) speakers (about, 1, 138, 222, 350, which is about one-fifth of the world's population) and the second-language when counting first-, second; and higher language speakers (Ethnologue, n.d.). It is one of the world's twenty-five

most spoken Languages (Zeidan, n.d.). It is one of the official and/or working languages of the UNGA, UNSC, FAP, ICAO, ITU, WHO, ICC, WHO, UNWTO, WIPO and IATA (CLEC, n.d.). It is also one of the official languages of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. It is spoken by 16% of the world's population (MacCarthy, n.d.). The United Nations celebrates the International Chinese Language Day on 20 April, which was chosen “to pay tribute to Cang Jie, a mythical figure who is presumed to have invented Chinese characters about 5,000 years ago (UN, n.d.).” Although it has the highest number of native speakers among the world's languages, it has relatively few non-native speakers outside [China](#) (Zeidan, n.d.). English has fewer than 400 million native speakers but more than one billion non-native speakers (Luo, 2022). About 200 million foreigners are learning and using the language today (Zuo, 2021). The other major languages each has less than about 400 million native speakers. Conversely, it has fewer non-native speakers than any of these other major languages. Curiously, despite its more than a billion speakers, it, unlike English, Arabic, Russian and Spanish, has not become a *world language*. This is apparently because of its severely limited “global function” and its concentration in China where the majority of its native speakers are found. Its most widely spoken variant is Mandarin, which is spoken by about two-thirds of China's population and which forms the basis for *putonghua* (Modern Standard Chinese). It is also the parent language of the Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese languages. (Along with China, these three countries constitute the Sinitic culture area called *Sinosphere*---countries that are historically heavily influenced by Chinese culture. Interestingly, these three countries are not part of *Sinophone*---regions where the Chinese language is spoken). Unlike English, Spanish, Portuguese and French, it was not spread through the colonization of other peoples but through the magnetism of Chinese civilization. Its diffusion to Japan, the Korean Peninsula and Vietnam was through soft power and not colonization. The language is being learned all over the world; and, according to Zuo, it has been incorporated into the national educational systems of over 70 countries (Zuo, 2021). According to Edeh and Xi, “the spread of the language follows the path of cultural diplomacy” (Edeh & Xu, 2020).

The Confucius Institutes, which “promote the Chinese language overseas, deepen the understanding of the Chinese language and culture among people of the world, promote educational cooperation and cultural and people-to-people exchanges between China and other countries, and enhance international understanding” (Confucius Institute, n.d.), have been at the forefront of the global spread of the Chinese language since 2004 when the first CI was established at the Seoul National University on 21 November 2004. According to Starr, the decision to establish the first Confucius Institute in South Korea was not a random choice, but “reflected the Chinese government's keen sense of history” (Starr, 2009, 65). The Confucius Institute Headquarters was established in January 2007, while the first Global Confucius Institute Conference was held in July 2007 in Beijing

(Confucius Institute, n.d.).

There are currently over 495 Confucius Institutes, 763 Confucius Classrooms and 49 model Confucius Institutes in 160 countries and regions (Confucius Institute, n.d.). Ruane noted that The Institute, which memorialises Confucius, the Chinese philosopher and statesman whose teachings have influenced social and political systems in southeast Asia, is one of the seven language and culture institutes in the world. Each Institute is not free-standing but is established under a partnership between a Chinese university and a foreign university. As China gains prominence on the world stage, the demand for Chinese language and culture has grown exponentially. In response to this need, the Chinese government started establishing Confucius Institutes. Since the establishment of that pioneer Confucius Institute, the Confucius Institute program has rapidly expanded its presence worldwide, with institutes being established in various countries and regions. By the end of 2004, only a few CIs had been established, most of them in Asia. However, the programme's growth accelerated in subsequent years, leading to the establishment of numerous Confucius Institutes across all continents, with a view to promoting the internationalization of the Chinese language and facilitating cultural exchange between China and other countries. These institutes not only serve as a conduit for preserving traditional Chinese culture but also exemplify China's active participation in global educational cooperation. According to Yu et al., “The Confucius Institutes (CIs) in different parts of the world are playing a critical role in the spread of the Chinese language and, by extension, of Chinese culture (Yu et al., 2024).” Some Confucius Institutes mingle their mandate with non-language programmes (Yu et al., 2024). The Institutes may establish satellite centres called Confucius Classroom or Confucius Teaching Point. They are established to satisfy the demand of Chinese language learners in different parts of the world, to enhance understanding of the Chinese language, to strengthen educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries, to deepen friendly relationships with other countries, to promote development of multiculturalism and to construct a harmonious world (Okunna & Elochukwu, 2020). Since 2020, the Confucius Institutes have been managed by the Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF), a non-governmental organisation established in June by 27 universities and enterprises. A government-organised non-governmental organisation (GONGO), CIEF is under the Ministry of Education and took over the 'Confucius Institute brand' from Hanban (Confucius Institute Headquarters), which was renamed the Center for Language and Education Cooperation (CLEC) in 2020. CLEC's main functions are: developing an international Chinese language teaching resource system; setting international Chinese language teaching standards; supporting training for teachers and curriculum development; hosting Chinese language teaching certification tests and organising international Chinese language exchanges and cooperation activities (British Council, n.d.).

The spread of the Chinese language in Nigeria prior to the establishment of the country's two CIs was stunted. In fact, prior to the establishment of the Institutes, there was not even one centre where the language was studied in the whole country. Acquaintance with the language scarcely went beyond the Chinese inscriptions on 'Made-in-China' goods imported from China and movies featuring icons such as Bruce Lee, Jack Chan, etc. or the Shaolin Temple. Those movies were fairly intelligible largely because of their sub-titles.

It is paradoxically curious that people should be avidly interested in watching those movies but barely evinced interest in studying the language in which they were made. The establishment of the CIs in 2008 was a paradigm shift in attitude towards the language, for with it started an outbreak of interest in the language and culture of the Chinese people among Nigerians. Materials for learning Chinese were scarce prior to the establishment of Confucius Institutes. Learning materials such as textbooks, dictionaries, and multimedia resources were not widely available, with the result that learners often relied on whatever resources they could find, including online materials and assistance from native Chinese speakers. Such limitation must have impacted trade and cultural contact between Nigerians and the Chinese.

Nigeria and China established diplomatic relations on October 10, 1971 (Zhao, n.d.); but there had been sporadic cultural exchanges between the two countries even before that. Formal Chinese language learning, however, was not one of those exchanges. Starting from the 1990s, interest in Chinese began to gather momentum. According to Edeh and Xu, “the impact of China's rise as an economic power in the global community can be felt in Nigeria, as such the need to promote Chinese language education in the education” (Edeh, & Xu, 2020). The first Confucius Institute in Nigeria was established at Nnamdi Azikiwe University on 8 March 2008 during the vice chancellorship of Ilochi Okafor. The idea to establish the Institute was pitched to him by Ike Mbonu of the News Agency of Nigeria (Omenyi, 2017).

The establishment of the Confucius Institutes has resulted in the establishment of degree programmes in Chinese Studies in the two host universities, (namely Nnamdi Azikiwe University and the University of Lagos) as well as private, profit-oriented Chinese language learning centres in major Nigerian cities. These centres, most of which are owned and staffed by the alumni of these two Institutes, are complementing the efforts of the Institutes in meeting the growing demand for the Chinese language and Chinese culture in the country. Examples of such centres are Nigerian Institute of Chinese Language and Culture (NICLC), Abuja; Mandarin Language School, Lagos; CMEFY (Chinese Language Made Easy for You), Lagos and [Efe Best Chinese Training School, Lagos. As can be seen, most of the private centres are in Lagos and Abuja.](#) These centres are typically run by language enthusiasts or businesses aiming to capitalize on the increasing trade and investment ties between Nigeria and China. The students of the private centres take the HSK examinations at either of the Confucius Institutes, which are currently the only accredited HSK centres in the country or at the Institutes' affiliate centres or at the Chinese Cultural Centre in Abuja. Overall, before the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in Nigeria, Chinese language education was in its infancy stage, with sporadic efforts by individuals, educational institutions, and private language centres. The advent of the CIs has provided a more systematic approach to learning Chinese, leading to significant expansion of Chinese language learning across Nigeria.

Nigeria began to recognize the importance of Chinese language as relationship with China deepened. According to Okunna and Elochukwu (2020), the efforts to make the language a critical component of the relationship began in earnest under President Obasanjo. Concerted efforts to promote Chinese language learning on a larger scale were

lacking before the establishment of the Confucius Institute. Despite the limited infrastructure at the time, there were individuals and institutions in Nigeria keen on learning the language. These pacesetters played a crucial role in laying the foundations for the growth of Chinese language education in the country.

This paper discusses the contribution of CI-NAU to the spread of the Chinese language in Nigeria.

A glance at CI-NAU

The Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, which became operational in February 2007, is the first Confucius Institute to be established in Nigeria (Embassy, 2008). Its memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed by Xu Jianguo (the then Chinese Ambassador to Nigeria) and Ilochi Okafor (the then Vice Chancellor of Nnamdi Azikiwe University) on 24 January 2007 (CCTV, n.d.). On 7 March 2008, it was inaugurated by Jiang Weiming (Cultural Attaché) and Ilochi Okafor on February 15, 2007 at the Chinese Embassy in Nigeria (Omenyi, 2007).

The Institute is the brain child of two individuals, namely the late Ike Mbonu and Ilochi Okafor, (Omenyi, 2017). The former (then Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) had pitched the idea to the latter (then Vice Chancellor of Nnamdi Azikiwe University) after the former returned from a 2005 trip to China. (The second CI in the country at the University of Lagos was inaugurated in 2009 (Edukugho, 2009)). The Institute took off at the building that presently houses the Center of Excellence for Arts Culture and Humanities located at the Garba Square (Elochukwu, 2024). It took off with around 30 students (made of students from the department of Igbo, African and Asian Studies, students from other departments and university staff) and 4 Chinese language teachers, one of who was Sunny Odinye who had studied Chinese for two years (2005-2007) at the Beijing Language University. Anas Elochukwu joined the Institute at the end of 2008 after studying Chinese for one year (2007-2008) at the Northeast Normal University. He mostly taught Chinese history and culture. Among the first staff members to study at the Institute were Nkechinyere Nwokoye, Gladys Udechukwu, Alexander Anedo and Chinenye Okoye. In 2013, six of the pioneer students proceeded to do bachelor's degrees at Xiamen University (Okafor, 2024). In 2012, the Institute was moved to its present site. There were two major reasons for relocation (Elochukwu, 2024). The first was the pressure of space. By 2012 the building (made up of one office and two classrooms) had become unable to support the rapid increase in enrolment and administration. The second was that most of the departments in the part of the university where the Institute was located had moved to their present locations by the time, with the result that the Institute became isolated, and consequently suffered reduced visibility. The establishment of the Institute “has not only promoted the educational and cultural exchanges between China and Nigeria, but also contributed great (sic) to the enhancement of mutual understanding and friendship between the two countries” (Weixin).

Programmes

The curricular programmes of CI-NAU are categorised into core and supplementary/subsidiary programmes. During the last 16 years of inception, CI-NAU

has impactfully contributed to the spread of the Chinese language in Nigeria, by onboarding thousands of Nigerian youths on the multifarious imperative of the Chinese language in the 21st century. It has done it through the following programmes:

HSK Programme

The core programme of CI-NAU is HSK---Chinese Proficiency Test organised by Chinese Tests International. The world third-largest language test brand after IELTS and TOEFL, it “assesses Chinese learners' abilities to use Chinese as a second language in their daily, academic, and professional lives through a standardized examination and evaluation with a uniform grading and scoring system (Chinese Tests, n.d.). The Institute currently offers HSK 1 to HSK 6---HSK 1, HSK 2, HSK 3 (basic levels), HSK 4 (intermediate level) and HSK 5 and HSK 6 (advanced levels). The Institute primarily enrolls adult learners, since it aims to produce young Nigerians with proficiency in Chinese, who can be employed as interpreters, translators, salespersons, etc. by Chinese firms in the country or local firms with relationship with the Chinese. HSK, an international standardized Chinese proficiency examination organised by Hanban (Confucius Institute Headquarters), is the most authoritative Chinese proficiency examination in the world. Learners use it to track their language proficiency; employers use it to assess prospective employees; Chinese language centres use it to evaluate teaching effectiveness; universities use it for admissions, class placement and credit transfer standards. The examination assesses students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities.

CI-NAU, which has been recognised as an “Outstanding HSK Test Center” four times (Yu et al.), is one of the two accredited HSK centres in Nigeria. (The other centre is the Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos). Its achievements in the examination have not only earned it global renown it has also contributed to the rise in the global visibility of the host university as well as enabled hundreds of students to study in China on Chinese scholarships.

CI-NAU is one of the three HSK centres in the country. The other two are the Confucius Institute at the University of Lagos and the China Cultural Centre, Abuja. Its HSK candidates also come from the affiliated centres, the Chinese Language Centre at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka as well as the general public.

Degree (B.A.) Programme

The Confucius Institutes in the different parts of the world play an important role in the spread of Chinese language in their host universities. For example, the two Nigerian universities that run a degree programme in Chinese language in Nigeria (namely, Nnamdi Azikiwe University and the University of Lagos), each has a Confucius Institute. CI-NAU's role in the establishment of the only full-fledged department of Chinese Studies in Nigeria is discussed below.

The establishment of a full-fledged degree programme in Chinese Studies at Nnamdi Azikiwe University took almost six years to materialize and was inspired by the presence of the Confucius Institute at that university. The decision by Senate of the university to start a Chinese language programme engendered so much tension among certain departments in the Faculty of

Arts. Three departments (department of Modern European Language, department of

Linguistics and department of Igbo Studies) jostled for permission to host the new programme. The department of Igbo Studies which would host the programme was renamed 'Department of Igbo, African and Asian Studies.' To prepare local manpower for the proposed Confucius Institute, Nnamdi Azikiwe University sent a handful of outstanding fresh graduates from the Faculty of Arts to China. Most of those students have played a critical role in the development of both the Confucius Institute and the University's department of Chinese Studies.

With an increasing number of outstanding Chinese language learners successfully applying for CI's scholarships to study in China and returning to engage in Chinese language teaching, local teachers have gradually taken over the teaching of Chinese language courses in the department of Chinese Studies. The cultivation of local Chinese language teachers has been largely achieved through CLEC's International Chinese Language Teachers Scholarship.

CI-NAU has attracted two immersion programmes for the department. The "3 +1" programme, which has been in place since the department's inception, enables the second-year students to do their third year in any Chinese university, while the "2 +2" programme, which will be activated this September, enables them to do their third and fourth years at Xiamen University. Additionally, the students of the department are the only students of the institute who are exempt from tuition.

Competitions

CI-NAU is committed to promoting the Chinese language and facilitating the dissemination and application of the Chinese language on an international scale. By providing high-quality Chinese language teaching, it helps learners to better understand the Chinese language, Chinese culture, as well as the Chinese people. By organizing various cultural activities, lectures, exhibitions, and other events, it affords both the students and the general public the opportunity to gain deeper insight into Chinese culture. According to Okunna and Elochukwu (2020), as Nigerians learn the Chinese language, they are consciously or unconsciously imbibing the Chinese culture. Through participation in cultural competitions, the students can gain a deeper understanding of the Chinese culture. They can also gain a deeper understanding of knowledge and skills in different cultural backgrounds, stimulate their interest in learning, improve their enthusiasm for learning, and enhance students' comprehensive qualities, including language expression, critical thinking, teamwork, etc., all of which are important qualities needed for students' future development. CI-NAU students participate in different competitions, such as the "Chinese Bridge" (organized by CLEC) and the "China-Nigeria Cup" speech competition (organized by the Chinese Embassy).

Affiliated Centres

CI-NAU has extended its catchment during the past sixteen years of its inception. It establishes outreach centers in order to reduce pressure on its own resources and facilities and to enhance access for potential learners residing far away. Its outreach centres are divided into two categories--- Confucius Classrooms (CC) and Confucius Teaching Points (CTP). (The term, teaching point (TP), is used inclusively for both categories. The affiliates, like the Institute itself, receive annual subvention from Chinese International

Education Foundation. Their subvention, however, is remitted to the Institute which, in turn disburses it to the affiliate centres contingent upon satisfactory fulfilment of the stipulations of their MoUs. By

establishing the centres, the Institute has been able to ease accessibility to Chinese language learning in the two regions in its immediate catchment area.

A CTP may be upgraded to a CC on the recommendation of the Institute after two years of inception. To ensure sustainability and to curtail the risk of exploitative commercialisation, the centres have been established at public institutions rather than private ones. The following are the centres that have been established by the Institute so far:

The Confucius Classroom at Federal Polytechnic, Oko

The Confucius Classroom at the Federal Polytechnic, Oko, Anambra State is the first affiliate centre established by CI-NAU. Established on 12 October 2010, the centre was upgraded to a Confucius Classroom in 2015 following approval by CLEC. Its MoU was signed by Godwin Onu (the then Rector of the polytechnic) and Ji Nengwen (the pioneer Director of CI-NAU). This CC has produced hundreds of alumni tens of who have gone to China to further their studies.

The Confucius Teaching Points at Unizik High School and Unizik Primary School

To catch them young and to serve the broadest number of the university community possible, CI-NAU has established CTPs at the host university's secondary and primary schools. The CTP at the former was established in May 2011, while the latter was established in 2018. At the beginning, the CTP at Unizik High School had 2 volunteer teachers, 110 students and 3 pilot classes. Zhang Le, the pioneer Chinese teacher of the CTP at Unizik Primary School was assisted by Sandra Oliver-Mbonu, who is currently researching Chinese language education in Nigeria at a Canadian university. The two teachers taught the school's 500 pupils, using a primer entitled *Happy Chinese*. Each class had a one-hour contact per week.

The Confucius Teaching Point at Enugu State College of Education (Technical), Enugu

CI-NAU began expanding its outreach beyond Anambra State (its host state) with the establishment of a CTP at the Enugu State College of Education (Technical), Enugu. This achievement owes much to the effort by Anas Elochukwu, who in 2013, shortly before he left for his doctorate at Xiamen University, persuaded the authorities of the prospective TPI to establish the centre. Located strategically across the popular Polo Mall (Shoprite), this centre serves the Enugu urban centre and its environs.

The Confucius Teaching Point at the Federal College of Agriculture, Ishiagu

CI-NAU is determined to expand its outreach far beyond the urban centres, hence the decision to establish a TP at the Federal College of Agriculture at Ishiagu in Ebonyi State. Ishiagu is located in a very remote part of the state, which itself is considered one of the less developed in the southern part of the country. The mainstay of its economy is peasant farming which is

richly supported by its fertile land. Apart from its fertile land, Ishiagu is known for wildcat mining. The establishment of a teaching point at the school created or increased awareness of the Chinese language and the great opportunities for betterment that accrue from it, especially among the vastly indigent residents of the village and its environs.

The Confucius Teaching Point at University of Port Harcourt

The Confucius Teaching Point at the University of Port Harcourt was inaugurated on 29 June 2019. It is the best of the affiliate centers so far established by CI-NAU in terms of infrastructure and teaching facilities. It has ten classrooms of various sizes, each of which can accommodate five hundred students, fifteen offices, two meeting rooms, two state-of-the-art language laboratories with a combined seating capacity of seventy-five, a library and an eat-in kitchen. Its inaugural class, which was held on 8 October 2019, had more than thirty students. The pioneer Chinese teachers were Mr Huang Changbin and Ms Li Dongmeng, both of who spent more than a month, promoting the new Chinese language programme.

China Culture Centre, Abuja

The China Cultural Centre in Nigeria, Abuja, established on 2 March 2012 and opened on 9 March 2013, is the second of its kind in sub-Saharan Africa as well as the 14th in the world (China Cultural, 2015). It is managed by the Chinese Embassy. Most of its Chinese teachers, however, are supplied by CI-NAU. It organises cultural activities sponsored and/or hosted by the embassy for governmental agencies, servicemen, businessmen, entrepreneurs, schools, etc. Its Chinese language programme is generally not intensive, being intended to give the students basic acquaintance with the language.

Conclusion

The Chinese language is fast becoming so popular in Nigeria. Its spread is being driven by formal and informal agents. The former includes schools, especially universities. The latter includes private organisations and language organisations, most of which are run by Nigerians who have studied the language in China. Leading the former are the two Confucius Institutes in the country, namely CI-NAU and CI-Unilag. CI-NAU is currently among the world's top 10 Confucius Institutes in the world. Through its achievements, it has enhanced not only its own global reputation but that of the host institution, as well. It has become a household name on the internet. Today, its students come not only from its catchment area, namely the southeast but also from the southwest (where there is the second CI), the Niger Delta (south south region) and the north. The role by the institute in spreading the Chinese language in Nigeria cannot be overstated. It has trained about 50, 000 Chinese language learners 719 of who have furthered their studies in different Chinese universities (Yu et al.). Some of its alumni have established their own Chinese language outfits, thus complementing its multifarious effort to spread Chinese in the country. Despite all its laudable achievements, this Chinese language and culture institute has remained grossly under-researched. This is the deficiency this paper intends to address.

The carrying capacity of CI-NAU, which is widely acclaimed the premier Chinese language centre in the country, has steadily shrunk since the COVID-19 pandemic, arguably because of the larger-than-expected drawdown on both subvention and the number of native speakers sent from CLEC. The major corollary of these challenges is the curtailment of intake which, in turn, is denying thousands the opportunity to study at the

institute and constraining the institute's outreach programme.

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