



## COMMENTARY

# African Agency within Confucius Institutes? *Challenges to equal cultural exchange between CIs and African host countries*

Wokedje Homawoo<sup>a</sup> and Sterling Conyers

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According to Okoth-Okombo, language policy and economic development in Africa play a significant role in ensuring effective participation of large sectors of society in development activities and the public platform.<sup>1</sup> During a time when Sino-African trade and cooperation is at an all-time high, Confucius Institutes (CIs) have become important social funnels to signal cultural interdependency, while sensitizing the incumbent African workforce to the Chinese language and culture that awaits them within the new world order. Between the possibility of employment in increasingly numerous, African-based Chinese business ventures or the possibility to travel to China for further education, understanding the Chinese perspective has become more important than ever.

The first CI was established in Seoul, South Korea, back in 2004.<sup>2</sup> CIs are state-sponsored organizations

which constitute an educational “collaboration with foreign universities and educational institutions in order to promote understanding of the Chinese language and culture”.<sup>3</sup> Originally, CIs were under the jurisdiction of Hanban, a “non-governmental institution and the executive organ of the International Council of Chinese Language, affiliated with the Ministry of Education”.<sup>4</sup> Hanban is responsible for the creation and provision of CI teaching material, as well as representing “the diffusion of the language and the culture of China”.<sup>5</sup> Between the years of 2004 and 2012, “353 Confucius Institutes and 473 Confucius Classrooms were established in 104 countries and regions” around the world.<sup>6</sup>

Soon after the establishment of the first CI in Seoul, the first CI on the continent of Africa was installed in December 2005 in Kenya, “partnered with Tianjin

<sup>a</sup> Wokedje Homawoo is a Togolese and French cultural strategist.

**Corresponding author:** wokedje.homawoo@kcl.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Okombo, Okoth (2001), ‘Language Policy: The Forgotten Parameter in African Development and Governance Strategies.’ (Nairobi: Univ. of Nairobi)

<sup>2</sup> Ren, Zhe (2012), “The Confucius institutes and China's soft power,” IDE Discussion Papers 330, Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Universitat de Valencia, *What is Hanban?* Available at: <https://www.uv.es/uvweb/confucius-institute-uv/en/hanban/what-is-hanban-1285919278085.html> [Accessed January 5, 2022].

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Ren (2012)

Normal University".<sup>7</sup> Li writes that Hanban personally approached each university with potential partner universities in China. Many considered the option to choose a partner university a reflection of Chinese acknowledgement of African agency. In January 2006, the Chinese government articulated its African policy, in which "education, science, culture and health aspects" are identified as a major subfield of the policy alongside economic cooperation, political cooperation, and peace and security.<sup>8</sup> Today, there are 61 Confucius Institutes in 45 out of the 54 nations in Africa. Unlike trends in the West, no Institutes to date have been subject to closure. These institutes are sponsored in equal parts by "one Chinese director and one local director, who ostensibly have equal positions and responsibilities".<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Li writes that neither the local nor the Chinese director can make changes or decisions without the express approval of the other. In this way, the Confucius Institute as a model is hypothetically structured to promote African agency and equal exchange of ideas, as well as shared governance.

According to interviewed faculty members at The University of Nairobi's Confucius Institute (UONCI), prior to its inauguration, Mandarin was a course instructed alongside various other languages, but has since gained priority, to the detriment of local languages. Further research conducted at UONCI suggested reasons for African students wanting to learn Mandarin that fell under the following categories: an interest in Chinese language and culture; encouragement from a parent to study the Chinese language; a desire to assist in Kenya's economic development, which could be facilitated by engaging in business with Chinese people; a lack of employment opportunities; a desire to attend the University of Nairobi.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, CIs have a greater impact in host countries with lower institutional quality.<sup>11</sup> While partnership conditions can vary greatly, Hanban typically commits

to providing around \$150,000 USD in start-up funding for the institutes in the US, followed by annual grants, textbooks, teaching materials, staff salaries, and airfare.<sup>12</sup> University of Nairobi faculty members, however, have expressed concerns about the dilapidated state of their Department of Languages and Linguistics in comparison to the UONCI, which they noted had a new computer lab, library, and modern conference room, equipped with multiple flat screen televisions.<sup>13</sup>

Notably, although Hanban provides textbooks to host universities, there is a lack of a global standardized curriculum resulting in operational disparities. In countries such as the United States, overarching faculties impose standardized curricula with regular assessments, and internal evaluations of programs.<sup>14</sup> Contrarily, in African CIs, there seems to be lack of diligent oversight, with students referring to inconsistencies between "curriculum and teacher training" and faculty expressing frustration around things happening in an "ad-hoc fashion".<sup>15</sup> This is exemplified in Tanzania's University of Dar es Salaam's (UDSM) CI where programs are "to run in line with the academic timetable" as an optional (non-degree) course".<sup>16</sup> In order to attain credits, students would need to follow a standardized program, yet an administrator at UDSM revealed that the bureaucracy that would follow the involvement of the Tanzanian Ministry of Education creates great barriers, which is why informal learning pathways are favoured instead.<sup>17</sup> Regardless, students persist as they are incentivised to receive one of the scarce scholarships that would allow them to study abroad in China.

Moreover, Chinese teachers and administrators are not specifically taught about the host country's culture and history - highlighting the limit of cultural exchange.<sup>18</sup> Li's Research conducted in four CIs in Southern Africa and three in East Africa found administrative problems across the CIs, with both sides

<sup>7</sup>Li, Siyuan (2021), 'China's Confucius Institute in Africa: A Different Story?', *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 353-366. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCED-02-2021-0014>

<sup>8</sup>White Paper on China's African Policy (2006), *China Report*. 2007;43(3):375-391. doi:[10.1177/000944550704300309](https://doi.org/10.1177/000944550704300309)

<sup>9</sup>Li (2021)

<sup>10</sup>Wheeler, Anita (2013), 'Cultural Diplomacy, Language Planning, and the Case of the University of Nairobi Confucius Institute.' *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 49(1), pp.49-63.

<sup>11</sup>Chen, Dongyang and Ha, Wei (2020), 'Are Confucius Institutes Building Blocks or Stumbling Blocks for Foreign Students in China: An Empirical Study of 190 Countries (1999-2015)', *ECNU review of education* 3 (2), 235-253.

<sup>12</sup>van den Heever, Claire (2017), 'Inside Africa's Confucius Institutes', Available at: <https://whokou.com/2017/12/04/inside-africas-confucius-institutes/>

<sup>13</sup> Wheeler (2013)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Li (2021) and Wheeler (2013)

<sup>16</sup>Stambach, Amy and Kwayu, Aikande (2017), 'Confucius Institutes in Africa, or How the Educational Spirit in Africa is Re-Rationalised Towards the East.' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 43(2), pp.411-424.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> King, Kenneth (2014), 'China's Higher Education Engagement with Africa: A Different Partnership and Cooperation Model?' *Revue internationale de politique de développement*, 5(1).

expressing discontent. In practice, host faculty explain that meetings and decisions occur in Chinese, excluding them as they cannot “share ideas”. Meanwhile, a Chinese teacher mentioned that “when the CI wants to establish new teaching centres, the local director talks with local schools about it, because he knows the local schools’ principals”.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in contradiction to their supposed functioning, this evidences that the Chinese often initiate new CIs through the host institution’s contacts, disregarding the quality of education received by students. This may also explain why students of the CI face great scepticism from peers, who perpetuate a narrative that “China is trying to take over”.

As early as 2019, calls to close the ubiquitous CIs began to trickle, then flood, from western media outlets. European and North American journalists alike published article after article documenting the rising general dissent, prompted by rapid Chinese economic growth and the Sino-US trade war, from westerners convinced that CIs acted as Chinese propaganda machines and were thus mere façades for something more sinister. Were one to research CIs in the West now, they would be presented with articles containing inflammatory terms such as “infiltration,” “Trojan Horse,” and “controversial”.<sup>20</sup> Western contemporary attitudes towards and support of CIs have undergone drastic changes in the years since their establishment; warm welcomes gradually replaced with an unshakeable wariness. Information on Hanban is increasingly difficult to find; a trip to their official website [hanban.org] now reroutes to the Chinese Centre for Language Education and Cooperation, possibly indicating a response to recent tenseness of Sino-US relations, or an attempt at rebranding the Confucius Institute model by renewing their original purpose of Chinese language instruction, rather than the propaganda machine many believe them to be.

As they currently stand, due to lack of oversight, limited input from hosting institution faculty members, and a strategy of valuing breadth over depth, CIs fail to create equitable cultural exchanges with African host countries. While students advance personal objectives, CIs do not develop meaningful skills that make African students competitive in the marketplace, which is why most aim to go to China: to truly learn. Further, students and faculty members alike express frustration about the

collaborative elements of the Institutions. These aspects combined prove that CIs are not as efficient as they were supposedly intended. Nevertheless, the contemporary response to CIs has been considerably more nuanced across the African continent. While most Africans welcome the opportunities that CIs may facilitate, they have arguably “become a site by which external forces can influence curriculum and the allocation of resources to their own ends”, which can be attributed to both a lack of detailed operational policy and cultural exchange, consequently leading to superficial collaboration.<sup>21</sup> All the while, the nature of the relationship raises issues of “academic freedom and integrity and the role of university officials being autonomous yet accountable to entities that provide funding”.<sup>22</sup>

Although many believe that there is little demand from Chinese companies for Mandarin-speaking Africans, as English remains a dominant language in business, the recruitment role played by CIs is supported by Chinese embassies and the Chinese Ministry of Commerce.<sup>23</sup> Simultaneously, there is an increase in demand from African businesses for Chinese-speaking Africans, which could be interpreted as a desire to change unbalanced power-dynamics between various stakeholders. This demand also reiterates the notion that substantial numbers of students are not currently learning Mandarin to a professional usage proficiency, further exposing the inefficiencies of the program.

Nonetheless, African students and teachers are exercising the necessary agency to advance their immediate goals including cultivating skills, formatting résumés, and participating in networking. Their association with a CI signifies “a badge of privilege or [socioeconomic] mobility”.<sup>24</sup> But even further, this willingness to develop their intercultural identity, defined by Kim as “an individual’s ability to grow beyond their original culture and encompass a new culture, gaining additional insight into both cultures in the process” supports this as a display of agency<sup>25</sup>. In fact, many argue that intercultural identities are inherent to learning a language, and “play a significant role in shaping how (students) learn and the value they attach to their studies”.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is paramount to understand the facets of student’s lives, in terms of

<sup>19</sup> Li (2021)

<sup>20</sup> Epstein, Ethan et al., (2018), ‘How China infiltrated U.S. classrooms.’ *POLITICO Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/16/how-china-infiltrated-us-classrooms-216327/> [Accessed January 5, 2022].

<sup>21</sup> Wheeler (2013)

<sup>22</sup> Alexander (2003)

<sup>23</sup> Li (2021)

<sup>24</sup> Stambach and Kwayu (2017)

<sup>25</sup> Kim Yun Young (1992). ‘Development of intercultural identity’ Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Communication Association, Miami

<sup>26</sup> Jin, Tinghe (2017) ‘Moving beyond ‘intercultural competence’: interculturality in the learning of Mandarin in UK universities’

“origins, experiences, languages and other characteristics of intercultural sensitivity in order to be able to appreciate the meanings they give and resources they bring to the study of Chinese”.<sup>27</sup> Centring both African student and teacher agency within CI educational instruction may mitigate current shortcomings, resulting in deeper cultural exchange and language proficiency for students.

In the longer term, however, CIs may be detrimental to the legitimization of local languages within the ‘linguistic market’ which may lead to a greater disenfranchisement of host country populations.<sup>28</sup> For Africans to participate in the ‘linguistics market’, barriers to collaboration in more domains will need to be removed: “African governments would have to go beyond establishing language learning classrooms and promote institutional cooperation schemes between their countries, most importantly in areas of research and development, technological innovation and science”.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it is becoming increasingly necessary for policymakers to develop the appropriate mechanisms to absorb students into the workforce, to truly reap the fruits of this investment. Additionally, while CIs provide language and culture courses at the university level, given then depth of Sino-African collaboration over the last, and future decades, African leaders may need to consider implementing Chinese courses at the primary and secondary levels. The Foreign Service Institute of the United States posits one would need to study approximately 2,200 class hours in order to reach fluency in Mandarin Chinese.<sup>30</sup> At a rate of four hours per week, every week of one calendar year, this would take around 10.57 years to attain fluency in the language. Thus, in reality, it was always unlikely that a university student affiliated with a CI without prior knowledge of Mandarin would learn the language to a professional proficiency by the end of their time at the CI.

On the one hand, by welcoming and promoting CIs, African Leaders have theoretically provided an opportunity to select students for the sensitization to a culture that awaits them in their interconnected future. On the other, these same leaders have failed to design the appropriate mechanisms to utilize these student’s newfound societal skills in a meaningful way. Moreover, the almost insurmountable level of bureaucracy surrounding revisiting the CI model of education perpetuates their inefficiencies. Any entity,

regardless of size, is never too successful to learn new things or improve an educational model. In this article we have demonstrated that African agency in the CI model is not prioritized by the Chinese; the underestimation of Africans may prove ill-informed in the long run. Alexander writes “language is a commodity that policymakers must negotiate in order to modernize their economies, develop national cohesion and protect the indigenous identity”.<sup>31</sup> A starting point to greater understanding within this partnership would be the mandatory sensitization of Chinese instructors to the African host country, through training and courses at the university. African students, faculty, and leaders have taken the proper steps and initiative towards this partnership, it is now time for China to do the same.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>28</sup> Alexander (2003), p.179-190.

<sup>29</sup> Eke, Ifeanyi (2021), ‘Globalisation will determine the growth of Mandarin in Africa’ *China-Africa Initiative - LSE*

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