



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Zhu, Hua and Li, Wei (2014) Geopolitics and the changing hierarchies of the Chinese language: implications for policy and practice of Chinese language teaching in schools in Britain. *The Modern Language Journal* 98 (1), pp. 326-339. ISSN 0026-7902.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/11356/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

Citation:

Zhu Hua & Li Wei (2014) Geopolitics and the changing hierarchies of the Chinese language: Implications for policy and practice of Chinese language teaching in schools in Britain 2014. *The Modern Language Journal*, 98(1), 316-329.

Geopolitics and the changing hierarchies of the Chinese language: Implications for policy and practice of Chinese language teaching in schools in Britain

Zhu Hua: zhu.hua@bbk.ac.uk and Li Wei: li.wei@bbk.ac.uk

Birkbeck College, University of London

Abstract:

Chinese has been the fastest growing modern foreign language in British schools and universities in the last decade, due largely to the perceived growing importance of mainland China as a global economic and political power and the substantial investment in Confucius Institutes and Classrooms by the Chinese government. This article focuses on how China's geopolitical strategy of promoting Chinese as a global language has been received and implemented in the UK and how different groups of learners of Chinese have been differentially affected by the implementation of Hanban's policies. Based on conversations with key stakeholders of the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms including managers, teachers and students, as well as observations, we investigate the different motivations and ideologies of the different interest groups. We also examine the cultural elements that are taught in the CIs and CCs. A particular focus is on how ethnic Chinese learners in the CIs and CCs react to the teaching of Chinese culture. The effect of promoting Putonghua on ethnic Chinese students who speak other varieties of Chinese, and how "foreignness" is constructed in the CIs and CCs, are specific concerns of the present study. The study contributes to the wider discussions of language ideology, language attitudes, motivations for language learning and learner identity vis-à-vis modern foreign language education.

Key words: Chinese , Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, geopolitics, British Chinese children.

Introduction

For the last decade, there has been a general decline in the number of students in schools and universities in the UK studying modern foreign languages. Traditionally, French is the most widely taught modern foreign language in schools. In 2002, 341,604 pupils in England and Wales took GCSE French. GCSE, the General Certificate of Secondary Education, is an academic qualification awarded in a specified subject, generally taken by students aged 14–16 in England and Wales. By 2010, the number of pupils taking GCSE French fell to 188,688, down 45%. Many people attribute the decline in part to the increased pressure on university places and the lobbying by the business sector to encourage the take-up of single sciences in schools. The number of pupils taking single sciences surged over the same period, with entries for chemistry and physics GCSE up by 32% and biology 28% respectively.

However, not all modern foreign languages suffer the same fate. Between 2002 and 2010, Spanish was up 16% while Mandarin Chinese was up 38%, although the total number of pupils taking GCSE Mandarin is only around 4,000. In 2010, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, set up a partnership with the Chinese government to train 1,000 Mandarin teachers for secondary schools in England. Speaking on a trip to China, he emphasized the importance of the language. "Offering every young person the chance to learn Mandarin will help to encourage mobility between the two countries, equip the next generation with the skills they need to succeed, and ensure the long-term success of our economy and society," he said. A 2011 survey of employers for the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) found that of those looking for language skills, Chinese was the second most sought-after (44%), after French (49%).

The rise of Chinese as a modern foreign language in schools and universities in the UK needs to be set against a background of the rise of Chinese as a global language. In June 2004, a small class of Chinese learners in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, were told that they would become the pilot institution for learning Chinese language and culture, and that the institute would be named after the ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucius (551-479 BC). Later that year, on 21 November 2004, the first Confucius Institute formally opened in Seoul, South Korea. In less than 10 years' time, nearly 400 Confucius Institutions (CIs) and over 300 Confucius Classrooms (CCs) have been established in almost 100 different countries and regions. The Office of Chinese Language Council International, otherwise known as Hanban, the organization that oversees the running of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms worldwide, proudly declares its ambition to establish 1,000 CIs and CCs by 2020, with at least 100 million foreign learners of Chinese. A visit to a local Confucius Institute is an integral part of the formal schedule by Chinese politicians and officials on their overseas trips. Six international conferences of Confucius Institutes have been held in Beijing, every time attended by high ranking government

officials. By now we are all used to not only headlines like *English is turning into a language we native speakers no longer understand*, due to the so-called free-form adoption by the Chinese, or Chinglish (Michael Erard, *Wired Magazine*, 16/07), but also *Is Mandarin the language of the future?* (BBC Online), *The Mandarin Offensive* (Wired), and *Saying "Global" in Chinese* (Foreign Policy). Indeed Chinese is the fast growing modern foreign language in schools and universities in many different countries across the globe.

In the meantime, efforts are made to use language as an instrument in the so-called cross-strait relations between mainland China and Taiwan. During the 2008 presidential election, Ma Ying-jeou, the current president of Taiwan, made a campaign promise to establish a cross-strait dictionary in order to facilitate cultural exchanges between the people on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait who use different Chinese written characters, different words and phrases and different pronunciations. In May 2012, the so-called cross-strait dictionary was published. Likewise, the State Language Commission of mainland China compiled a *Global Chinese Dictionary*, which was launched in 2010 by the former Singaporean President Lee Kuan Yew and the former Chairman of the Political Consultative Committee of the Chinese government, Li Ruihuan, both of whom are named as consultants in the dictionary.

It seems clear that the promotion of Chinese is part of China's geopolitical strategy and must be understood as such. And as part of this geopolitical strategy, different initiatives are carefully designed and implemented in response to local needs and characteristics: in countries that have had a traditionally friendly relationship with China, in countries that have had a traditionally not so friendly relationship with China, in countries with useful and substantial natural resources for China's economic development; and in countries of political, military and strategic importance. There have been a number of studies examining the China's policies regarding the promotion of Chinese (e.g. Gil, 2008, 2009; Paradise, 2009; Li, Mirmiranin and Ilacqua, 2009; Zhao and Huang, 2010; Yang, 2010). In this article, we are concerned with how China's efforts in promoting Chinese as a global language has been received and implemented in the UK and how different groups of learners of Chinese have been differentially affected by the implementation of Hanban's policies. In other words, this paper is not about the expansion of Chinese as a global language *per se*. Rather it is about the consequence of the deliberate and concerted policies and efforts to promote a particular variety of Chinese as a global language on its learners. The article thus contains three parts. First, we will discuss the motivations of promoting the Chinese language, especially Putonghua (see discussion of terminology below). We will look at some of the discourses surrounding the policies. We will also look at the motivations of those who decide to take up Chinese classes. Our focus is on the ideological

stances behind the discourses and the conflicts, apparent or potential, between them. Then we will look at what cultural elements are taught in the CIs and CCs. A particular focus is on how ethnic Chinese learners in the CIs and CCs react to the teaching of Chinese culture. Finally, we will look at the effect of promoting Putonghua on ethnic Chinese students who speak other varieties of Chinese, and how “foreignness” is constructed in the CIs and CCs. The data are drawn from multiple sources, including “conversations” with key stakeholders and participants in various aspects of Chinese language teaching and learning in British schools and universities, as well as observations in Confucius Institutes and Classrooms. We hope that our discussion will contribute to the study of language ideology, language attitudes, motivations for language learning and learner identity vis-à-vis modern foreign language education.

Before we go further, a consideration of names of the Chinese language varieties is in order. Modern Chinese comprises eight mutually unintelligible varieties, based on historical connections and geographical distribution. The English names such as Cantonese, Hokkien and Hakka are given to specific dialects of the regional varieties of Chinese. Mandarin is the English name for the northern variety of Chinese. There is a standardized variety, known as *Putonghua*, which is used as the national language of mainland China. It is based on Mandarin but not entirely the same as Mandarin. However, the English name Mandarin is widely used to describe the standard variety spoken in Taiwan and Singapore as well, and is frequently used in scholarly publications and public discourse as a convenient substitute of *Putonghua*. In this paper, we use Mandarin because that is the term that is commonly used to refer to the variety of Chinese that is taught in the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in the UK. Hanban officially promotes Putonghua. But it accepts that the Chinese spoken by many of its teachers is not very standard. The term Mandarin is often used in the English documents and speeches by Hanban officials.

Ideologies and motivations behind the expansion of CIs and CCs in the UK

According to the Confucius Institutes Network UK, Hanban’s representative in London, there are 23 Confucius Institutes and 60 Confucius Classrooms at the beginning of 2013. They cover England, Scotland, Wales and North Ireland. The Confucius Institutes are located in universities, in partnership with Chinese counterparts. In most CIs, the director is appointed by the UK partner university, supported by a management board consisting of people from both the UK partner university and the Chinese partner university. The Chinese partner university usually provides some teaching staff at their own cost, but the majority of teaching staff are recruited locally. Each Institute is responsible for drawing up and managing their own budget. Hanban provides earmarked funds for specific activities rather than the general running cost.

The Confucius Classrooms were initially coordinated through the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), a government contracted organization to support specialist schools in England and Wales in particular. As the SSAT's contract with the government ended in 2011, the network of Confucius Classrooms was transferred to the Institute of Education (IOE), University of London, in June 2012 to become the IOE Confucius Institute for Schools. It is essentially the national centre for advice on and support for the teaching and learning of Chinese and about China in secondary and primary schools. The exact number of students on the Confucius Institutes and Classroom programmes is unknown. The IOE CI for Schools claims that there are over 6,000 pupils registered on the Confucius Classroom curriculum.

Hanban has never shied away from declaring its motives as i) the promotion of Chinese culture and language worldwide; ii) the promotion of trade ties; and iii) the extension of the Chinese Party-State's campaign of "soft power" into the educational sphere in foreign countries. While it calls itself a non-government organization, it is affiliated to China's Ministry of Education and has close ties to a number of senior communist party officials. The current chair of Hanban Liu Yandong is a politburo member and State Councilor. Li Changchun, the 5th-highest-ranking member of the politburo standing committee, was quoted in *The Economist* saying that the Confucius Institutes were "an important part of China's overseas propaganda set-up"—a statement that has been seized upon by critics as evidence of a politicized mission ([A message from Confucius; New ways of projecting soft power](http://www.economist.com/node/14678507), *The Economist*. 22 Oct 2009. <http://www.economist.com/node/14678507> Retrieved on 12 February 2013).

It is clear from Hanban's various policy documents and the speeches by Hanban officials at the annual Confucius Institutes conferences that the CIs and CCs are not entirely academic and educational organizations. They also have the goal of helping China to improve its image abroad and to alleviate concerns of a 'China threat' in the context of the country's increasingly powerful economy and military (Star, 2009). An article published by the American [Council of Foreign Relations](#) has argued that the Confucius Institutes are part of the initiative where "Beijing is trying to convince the world of its peaceful intentions, secure the resources it needs to continue its soaring economic growth, and isolate Taiwan." (Pan, 2006). Some of the most frequently occurring words and phrases in the Hanban documents and speeches are: 弘扬中华文化 (promote Chinese culture), 促进世界和平 (facilitate world peace), 增强友谊 (enhance friendship).

Here, it is worth mentioning that the naming of the institutes after the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius is clearly an attempt to claim the historical root and continuity as well as

the legitimacy in representing the traditional Chinese culture, and to dissociate the current regime in China from the anti-Confucius campaigns both during the 1912 New Culture Movement under the Nationalists' government and in 1973 during Mao's Cultural Revolution. In recent decades, interests in pre-modern Chinese culture and in Confucius in particular have seen a major resurgence in mainland China. Confucius temples have been rebuilt all over the country; his birthdays are marked by elaborate ceremonies; and his teachings are reinterpreted and reproduced. A massive statue has been erected on the side of the Tiananmen Square at the heart of Beijing, in front of the National Museum. All of these can be seen as what Hobsbawm called the "invention of tradition" - a deliberate creation and promulgation that implies a connection with the past for present personal, commercial, political, or national self-interest (e.g. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1980). Indeed, the Vice-Chair of Hanban, Chen Jinyu, admitted that the use of Confucius' name is to create a brand. She said, "With regards to the operation of Confucian Institutes, brand name means quality; brand name means returns. Those who enjoy more brand names will enjoy higher popularity, reputation, more social influence, and will therefore be able to generate more support from local communities." (Starr, 2009: p. 69).

From the Chinese partner universities' point of view, the motivations for setting up Confucius Institutes overseas may be more pragmatic. We spoke to the representatives of three Chinese universities that have established Confucius Institutes in the UK and the managers in the institutes. All of them mentioned the funding that Hanban was giving to the CIs. They felt that it was an opportunity that they could not afford to miss. Two of them also stressed the employment opportunities for their graduates and one of them said that they were using the CI as a staff development opportunity so that some of their staff who had not had a chance to study outside China could spend some time overseas. They were of course very aware of what Hanban wanted them to do. But they generally had a very pragmatic view of what can be achieved, in terms of promoting Chinese culture and improving China's image globally, through the teaching of Chinese. One of the managers said,

'They (referring to the UK students) believe what they believe. You can't change their views within a few weeks of teaching them some basic Chinese. Many of them don't even know where China is. They can't distinguish Asia from Africa. And they think Chinese and Arabic are all linked, and we write from right to left. If they learn some basic phrases and are able to say hello to a Chinese person, then that's good. They can probably get a job by claiming that they have learned Chinese.'

Some critics of the Confucius Institutes suggest that the initiative has been motivated in part of a linguistic, and perhaps also cultural, ideology that the Chinese language has some inherent power to change the minds of its learners (Brady, 2011). There is certainly a great deal of scientific research that seems to show that Chinese language users involve more brain areas, especially the right temporal lobe, when processing the language (e.g. Wellcome Trust Report 2003. <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/News/Media-office/Press-releases/2003/WTD002864.htm>), that learning Chinese written characters aids the development of motor skills, learning shapes and letters, and the visual identification of graphics (Bounds, 2010 reporting research from Indiana University), and that there is a correlation between the learning of Chinese and math skills (Tang et al. 2006). These findings have been seized upon by the popular press and the language purists in China in constructing and spreading the myth of the ‘scientific nature’ of the Chinese language. Elsewhere we have examined how the myth has influenced the everyday thinking and behaviour of Chinese parents who insist on their children’s learning of Chinese in particular ways as they believe that the language could give its users certain cognitive advantage (Li Wei and Zhu Hua, 2011). The myth seems to have led to another popular belief that those who take the trouble to study Chinese will be more sympathetic to China’s perspectives. There was much discussion in the Chinese press that one of the reasons that Chris Patton, the last British Governor of Hong Kong, was hostile to mainland China was because, unlike previous British governors of the colony, he did not speak Chinese, therefore did not understand the Chinese culture and the mentality of the Chinese people (Flowerdew, 2012). And more recently Gary Locke, the US Ambassador to China, has been called a "fake foreign devil who cannot even speak Chinese." despite his ethnic Chinese origin (<http://behindthewall.nbcnews.com/news/2012/03/23/10644657-not-chinese-enough-in-china-chinese-americans-caught-between-2-worlds?lite>). However, in the conversations we had with the managers and teachers in the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, none of them mentioned such beliefs. In fact, when we specifically raised the issue of the ‘scientific nature’ of the Chinese language, one of the teachers responded,

‘We are teaching them very basic Chinese, some greetings and phrases. We teach them some characters that they can remember because they are more like pictures. I don’t think it’s going to change their brain functions. They will have to be very advanced readers to be able to think differently.’

The majority of the individuals working for and in the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms do not seem to believe that Chinese language teaching would create a new cohort of China sympathizers. They think that their job is to give the learners some basic knowledge of the Chinese language and culture and to raise their interest in things Chinese.

Interestingly, the British partners seem to share such views. In our conversations with three British representatives in the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, none of them seemed to think that the teaching and learning of Chinese language and culture would produce China sympathizers. In fact, one of the directors of a Confucius Institute said,

‘That (referring to the belief that Chinese language learners are more sympathetic towards China) is a very simplistic and naïve view. We teach a whole range of languages in our university and have done so for many decades. There is no evidence that our students are necessarily more sympathetic towards any particular country or culture. They may understand it more, because they know the language. But they are definitely not persuaded by the politics. In fact, I know people who learned Russian and are very opposed to the Soviet Union and to what’s going on in Russia now.’

They all said that a general awareness of the Chinese language and culture and an increased interest in Chinese and China was what they wanted to see through the CIs. It is true that there has not been the same kind of backlash witnessed in the USA regarding the expansion of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms or the controversies regarding the policies and practices in some of the organizations. When a China expert at the London School of Economics raised concerns about hosting the Confucius Institute on campus in the wake of scandal over LSE’s dealing with the Gaddafi’s regime in Libya, he was accused of having an ‘outdated cold war mentality’ by the Chinese ambassador in London, who insisted that the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms ‘aided mutual understanding and friendship as well as providing language and cultural training’. A spokesman for the LSE responded by saying that "the Confucius Institute for Business at LSE focuses on business language teaching, for which there is great demand, as well as cultural events – most of them open to the public. No one at our Confucius Institute has ever experienced any attempts to stifle discussion or inquiry. Each Confucius Institute has a Chinese partner university and ours is Tsinghua, one of China's most prestigious universities. The relationship is open and transparent, in the best traditions of academic exchange.’

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/15/confucius-institutes-universities-chinese-ambassador>).

Similarly, pragmatic considerations seem to be a main motivation for universities and schools in the UK to want to set up Confucius Institutes and Classrooms on their premises, as Hanban provides substantial start-up funds and supplies teachers and teaching material for free, offers training opportunities and makes available further funds for specific activities and events. One locally appointed manager of a Confucius Institute remarked,

‘They (i.e. Hanban) gives us money and textbooks. Our partner university in China sends teachers. We charge fees to the students who take Chinese lessons. We can ask for more money from Hanban to organize events for the students, to send them on study tours to China. Where else can you get such a deal?’

One of the Assistant Head Teachers of a school where there is a Confucius Classroom admitted that the free supply of teachers and teaching material was a major attraction for the school to bid for the Confucius Classroom. She said,

‘We get support from both sides (i.e. Britain and China). The Department of Education is keen to support the initiative. There is special fund for new languages such as Chinese. And our Chinese partner send wonderful teachers to us. We are very happy.’

From the learners’ perspective, the motivations for choosing to take Chinese lessons are very diverse. Of the six school children from one Confucius Classroom, all between the age of 12 and 14, whom we spoke to, four said that they wanted to learn something different. Two of them said specifically that they were good at learning languages and wanted to try a new language. One pupil said she had Chinese neighbours and wanted to learn the language to communicate with them. Three said they were interested in Chinese culture and the examples they gave included Kung Fu, Tai Chi, fan dance, and Chinese food. There was one ethnic Chinese pupil, whose family are Cantonese first language speakers. He chose to take Mandarin lessons at school because the parents said that it would be useful to learn Mandarin. None of them mentioned that they were learning Chinese in order to enhance their future job prospect, although when we specifically asked the question, most of them were aware of the media talk of the growing economic and political power of China.

The university students who choose to take Chinese lessons at the various Confucius Institutes seem to have even more diverse motivations. We talked to 14 non-ethnic Chinese students from three different Confucius Institutes at length about their motivations and

experience of learning Chinese. Only two of them repeated the public discourse that Chinese is important because China is a rising world power and the language will be useful for future employment. One student expressed his desire to use his linguistic skills for social change,

‘I want to do something about the terrible situation with the abandoned girls because of the one-child policy, and migrant workers who are abused. I want to talk to them in person. The Chinese government isn’t doing anything for them. And as far as I can tell, nobody in China cares. I want to help them. But I need the language to be able to help them.’

Most of the students we spoke to said that they wanted to learn another language because they were good at languages generally and learning Chinese would be an interesting personal challenge for them. One of them even cited the widely publicized research by psycholinguistics that showed cognitive advantages of being bilingual and multilingual. This is in contrast to the absence of such views articulated by the teachers. Five of them gave specific personal reasons for them to choose to take Chinese lessons, including having a partner or close friend who is Chinese, having Chinese neighbours, wanting to have a holiday in China, and not wanting to do a full degree in Chinese but wanting to learn the language nevertheless. Only one specifically said that he loved Chinese food and Chinese culture and wanted to be able to communicate when he goes to Chinese restaurant or watches a Chinese movie.

There is a group of students attending Chinese classes in the Confucius Institutes who are ethnic Chinese. The majority of them tend to be speakers of varieties of Chinese other than Mandarin. Some are British-born Chinese students who attended Chinese community schools when they were younger but only learned Cantonese. We talked to four of such students about their motivations for doing Mandarin Chinese at the Confucius Institute. Interestingly, it was this group of learners who seem to have bought the public discourse about China’s rising as a world power. All of them independently talked about their perceived usefulness of Mandarin specifically for their future employment. Many of them also expressed a desire to identify themselves as Chinese and with other Chinese people. One said,

‘So many people are learning Chinese now. I feel quite embarrassed not being able to speak Mandarin as a Chinese person.’

Another said,

‘My parents speak Cantonese. I can speak some Cantonese too. But Mandarin is more useful now because China is growing stronger. There are so many students from mainland China. They all speak Mandarin.’

One student told us,

‘I want to learn to read and write Chinese better. I didn’t learn very much at the Chinese school. It’s not good for a Chinese not to be able to read or write Chinese characters. My friends from China can all read and write Chinese. They send me emails and text messages in Chinese. But I can’t read them.’

It seems clear that different political, cultural and linguistic ideologies underlie the different motivations expressed by the stake holders and learners. What is interesting is that the institutional ideologies of Hanban do not readily translate into practice by the key stakeholders including the managers and teachers of the CIs and CCs. What seems even more interesting is that different groups of learners choose to learn Chinese, especially Mandarin, for very different reasons of personal experiences and trajectories. The overall lack of reference to the global economy, job market and migration in the students’ discourse, especially that of the non-ethnic Chinese students, was quite striking and unexpected. It seems that their motivation for learning Chinese is primarily local and more immediate to their personal circumstances. Although the ethnic Chinese students did mention the rising power of China and the perceived importance of the language, their main reason for taking the Chinese lessons was also more personal and immediate, to avoid embarrassment or to be able to communicate more effectively with their friends.

(Re)Presenting Culture and the culture authenticity

In Hanban’s discourse, there is much talk about culture: promoting the Chinese culture through teaching the Chinese language, and developing and raising awareness of the Chinese culture. What exactly is meant by ‘culture’ in this context? How is culture taught in the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in the UK? We probed these questions in our conversations with our participants of the present study. It seems that most of the manager, teachers and learners share a general perspective that takes culture primarily as customs and practices rather than as beliefs and values.

Hanban officials are particularly careful not to be seen to be exporting political beliefs and values through the teaching in the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms. In our meeting with one of the Hanban officials on a visit to the UK, we asked specifically what he wanted the CI and CC students to learn about the Chinese culture. He emphasized the ‘basic knowledge of Chinese history and geography’, and the ‘traditional cultural customs’ of the Chinese people. He admitted that he believed that teaching the British students about the ‘long, ‘unbroken history of China would help them to appreciate why unity is important to the Chinese people’. But

‘at an elementary level, all we can do is to teach them the differences in customs between the Chinese and foreigners. At an advanced level, we can teach them that there are different ethnic groups in China. Each province and region has its own traditions and customs.’

So whilst the ideological stance is one of the Chinese government’s ‘unity in diversity’, the focus is more narrowly focused on traditional customs and everyday social practices.

For the managers and teachers in the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, the objective appears to be very modest. The teachers of the Confucius Classroom that we studied seemed to have constructed a notion of the Chinese culture to accommodate what the pupils said they wanted to learn, e.g. Kung Fu, Tai Chi, fan dance, Chinese food, plus what they believed were the must-know facts of China, e.g. the Terracotta Army, the Great Wall, pandas, etc. Occasionally there were attempts to teach a short poem in Chinese such as the well-known Tang poem ‘Sympathy for the Peasants (悯农) or Li Bai’s (701-762 AD) ‘Thought on a Still Night’ (静夜思). But they are usually taught without much contextual information or information about the poets. One of the teachers said to us, when asked about what Chinese cultural elements she taught in her class, half-jokingly but tellingly, ‘*Kung Fu Panda*’.

We did, however, observe a number of instances where ‘traditions’ were ‘invented’ in an apparent attempt to present the Chinese culture. One teacher gave out a red badge to a pupil at each session and the pupil would have to lead the whole-class recital of a text they learned in the previous session. She told the pupils that this was what happened in her class when she was at school in China learning English. Several teachers asked the class to stand up at the beginning and end of each session and greeted the teacher in Chinese.

At the Confucius Institutes in the universities, the cultural element seemed less simplistic and cliché. There was quite a lot of teaching of ‘traditional customs’ such as gift giving and

acceptance, compliment paying and response, and kinship terms as address terms. They were well integrated into language teaching, and there are attempts to explain the origins of some of the customs. There were also attempts to explain how customs may vary in different parts of China. We observed classroom discussions of what is meant to be ‘friendly’ and ‘warm’ in the Chinese cultural context and of the Chinese notion of ‘face’. We observed one incidence when the teacher was talking about the meaning of ‘the family’ with reference to multi-generational extended families, one student asked about the one-child policy. The teacher first responded by saying that she was the only child in her family and she could not see anything wrong with the policy. When the student wanted to pursue it further, the teacher said that it had nothing to do with the language structures she was teaching and she refused to be engaged in any further discussion.

It has to be said that the majority of the students did not seem to want to be taught anything beyond what was in the textbooks and what the teachers were offering to teach. Some of them explicitly rejected the idea of learning culture through learning language and seemed to believe that language and culture were separate things. One student we talk to said,

‘I want to learn the language and to know what to say when I meet Chinese people in different contexts. I can read about Chinese culture and history and all that in my spare time. I don’t want to waste time in the class to be taught anything that I can read myself.’

Another student said,

‘I know it’s pretty basic. But that’s OK. I want to be able to communicate in Chinese at a basic level. If I go to China, I can learn about the Chinese culture there. It’s more authentic.’

The issue of authenticity as raised by the last student commentator is an interesting and important one. This particular individual seemed to think that the Chinese culture (re)presented by the teacher was inauthentic, and one had to go to China to experience authentic Chinese culture. What seems to be at issue is the role of the teacher in mediating the learning of culture (see Kramsch, 1998, 2012). Many of the teachers only have a superficial knowledge of the Chinese culture, including the traditional customs that they sometimes try to teach. They often get the facts wrong, and cannot explain the origins or reasons for certain traditions. One example is when a female Chinese teacher in her late twenties asked her class what they knew about the

traditional Chinese customs for the Spring Festival, i.e. Chinese New Year, a student replied that children get 红包 (*hongbao*, ‘red envelopes with money’). The teacher corrected the student by saying that *hongbao* was what you get as a bonus if you are an employee in a big company for a job well done. She was apparently unaware that the term *hongbao* could be used for both the Chinese New Year red envelopes and bonus. Some commentators in China have remarked on the young Chinese language teachers’ lack of knowledge of the Chinese culture. One senior professor of the university that sends teachers to one of the Confucius Institutes that we studied said to us,

‘They are youngsters, freshly out of university. They want to be modern, fashionable, and western. What do they know about Chinese culture?! What do they know about China?! They want to be Chinese teachers, because they want to go overseas. They can’t teach Chinese culture.’

The authenticity of the culture (re)presented by the teachers in the Confucius Institutes has also been questioned by the ethnic Chinese students. As we said earlier, most of these students are attending the Chinese class because they are speakers of varieties of Chinese other than Mandarin or because they are British-born and did not have the opportunity to learn to read and write Chinese. However, they have experienced authentic Chinese culture in their own families and communities. As the cultural critic Ien Ang said about her own experience, she knew what was good Chinese food and what was not; and she would not be cheated with regard to cultural customs, even though she did not speak the language (2001). Elsewhere we examined an example from a classroom exchange in a Chinese complementary school where the Mandarin teacher from mainland China was unaware of the Chinese term 曲奇 (Cantonese: *kuk-kei*, Mandarin: *quqi*) was a Cantonese transliteration of the English word *cookie* and insisted on teaching the Mandarin pronunciation to the total puzzlement of the Cantonese-speaking pupils. Similar examples were observed in the Confucius Institutes, although the ethnic Chinese students tended to be too polite to point out the teachers’ lack of knowledge (Li Wei, 2013).

Another interesting example from the Confucius Institute classes that we observed was the ethnic Chinese students’ awareness of ‘good handwriting’. Chinese first language users have been acculturated into an appreciation of the aesthetics of handwriting, which includes balance of the different component parts, the flow of the strokes, the shape of the character and the space it occupies relative to other characters, etc. Stanley-Baker (2010) describes Chinese writing as ‘sheer

life experienced through energy in motion that is registered as traces on silk or paper, with time and rhythm in shifting space its main ingredients'. The Chinese believe that handwriting is a person's outer self, and good handwriting is an indicator of a person's educational and cultural standing. To achieve good handwriting, one must first of all learn the correct stroke order of a character. Such ideology has been ingrained into the traditional teaching of Chinese literacy. Children in China are not only tested on correct character components, but also correct stroke orders. So when the ethnic Chinese students saw their teacher wrote Chinese characters on the white board with the wrong stroke order, they giggled amongst them. They also commented, privately, on the handwriting styles of the teachers and described some of them as 'childlike', 'ugly', and most tellingly, 'like a foreigner's writing'.

In general the so-called culture as represented in the Chinese language teaching in the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms is very basic and restricted largely to traditional customs and stereotypically Chinese symbols such as landmarks, festivals, and food. The expectation from both the teachers and the students is low; the teachers were not expected to teach much culture and the students were not expected to learn much either. Some of the teachers appear to know relatively little of the Chinese culture. The authenticity of the Chinese culture as presented by the teachers in class and as represented by the teachers themselves was brought into question by some of the students, especially by those ethnic Chinese students.

In the next section, we want to focus especially on the ethnic Chinese students in the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms. We are particularly interested in how the promotion of Chinese as a global language has affected this group of learners and how the specific policies and practices of the CIs and CCs in the UK have impacted on them.

The othering of Chinese learners

Ever since the racial tensions between the Chinese and local communities in Southeast Asia in the 1950s, China has been extremely careful in keeping the so-called overseas Chinese affairs separate from either its internal or external matters. China does not recognise dual nationality, and China's official line is that overseas Chinese who hold foreign passports are foreigners and would be treated the same as all other foreigners. There is a government-supported national association for returnees and families of overseas Chinese. During the 1980s and 90s, the main job of the association was to raise funds from overseas Chinese to support construction and other projects, especially in the coastal areas of mainland China that are the main sources of Chinese immigrants.

Language maintenance in the Chinese diasporas has been a major issue of concern, but mainly amongst the overseas Chinese communities themselves. China has no specific policy in this area. Today there is a well-established global network of Chinese heritage language schools, variably called Chinese community schools or complementary schools. They are self-support, voluntary organizations set up by the overseas Chinese communities. When Hanban was set up to promote the teaching of Chinese overseas, it did not consider the large number of overseas Chinese and their descendants who are also in need of support especially in terms of textbooks and teacher supply. There is no official policy from Hanban regarding the inclusion of ethnic Chinese students in the CIs and CCs. The only relevant unwritten policy is about students from Taiwan. Following the Chinese government's position, students from Taiwan would be welcome to take Chinese classes at the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms. However, as students from Taiwan generally know Mandarin, there is no need for them to attend CIs and CCs.

In the earlier days of the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in the UK, ethnic Chinese pupils and students were turned away because the managers and teachers assumed that they knew Chinese already and that it would be a waste of time for them to learn the very basics of the language. There was little appreciation of the sociolinguistic situation of the overseas Chinese communities and the language shift that they were experiencing. After the initial period, many CIs and CCs realised that they needed the ethnic Chinese learners to boost their recruitment numbers and that most of the ethnic Chinese students had little knowledge of Mandarin. Now every Confucius Institute and Classroom in the UK has some ethnic Chinese students and pupils. Many of them are British-born, but some are from other Chinese-speaking regions such as Hong Kong and Malaysia who are taking the opportunity to learn Mandarin.

The presence of the ethnic Chinese learners in the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms is a challenge to the teachers and managers who are largely unprepared for the situation. When we asked them how they felt about having ethnic Chinese learners in the class, they all said it was difficult to manage. If the numbers were big enough, they would have separate classes for the ethnic Chinese students and the non-ethnic Chinese learners. In the meantime, the Chinese communities in the UK are unhappy that so much investment has been given to the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms while their own efforts of promoting Chinese through complementary schools are largely unsupported. In particular, they are unhappy about the expansion of Mandarin at the cost of Cantonese and other regional and community varieties of Chinese. Teachers of the Chinese complementary schools in the UK constantly complain about the fact that whilst the Cantonese schools all offer Mandarin classes, none of the Mandarin schools have Cantonese classes. Cantonese has traditionally been the *lingua franca* of the Chinese

communities in the UK. Community leaders have long argued that the maintenance of Cantonese would aid community cohesion, especially in the context of rapid generational language shift to English. Now a different variety of Chinese has been introduced into the community. But it is not shared by the majority of its people. Some community leaders have privately expressed an anxiety that the expansion of Mandarin may lead to segregation within the Chinese community between speakers of different varieties of Chinese, which would in the long run harm the community's position in the British society.

It is rather unfortunate that most of the managers and teachers of the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in the UK seem to be unaware of the anxieties and concerns of the local Chinese communities. Many of them seem to hold on to the ideology that Mandarin is the national language of China and every Chinese person should know it, whereas Cantonese and other varieties of Chinese are merely 'dialects' and their use should be confined to home and local contexts. One incident in the Confucius Classroom that we observed serves as a good case in point. The teacher, a female Mandarin volunteer in her mid-twenties, had asked the ethnic Chinese pupil in the Mandarin class to prepare a Chinese song to teach her classmates. When the girl came back to the class the following week and sang a song in Cantonese, the teacher was stunned because she could not understand it. Other non-ethnic Chinese children in the class then said to the Chinese girl that her song was not Chinese. The girl was very upset. But the teacher did not come to her defence. Instead she said that she would teach the class 'a real Chinese song' in Mandarin. We also observed on a number of occasions when ethnic Chinese students in the Confucius Institutes at universities wrote traditional, complex Chinese characters, the teacher marked them as 'wrong'.

Such incidents can have a devastating 'othering' effect on the ethnic Chinese learners. In fact, one of the ethnic Chinese students at a Confucius Institute said to us,

'She (referring to the teacher) treats us like foreigners. I suppose we are. But she thinks we don't know Chinese at all. We don't know Mandarin and we want to learn Mandarin. But we know some Cantonese. I can actually read some Chinese too.'

There is no doubt that the promotion of Chinese through Confucius Institutes and Classrooms has raised awareness of China, the Chinese language and the Chinese culture amongst the general British public. But the specific focus on Mandarin has not helped to enhance community cohesion within amongst the Chinese in the UK. In fact, there is evidence

of an ‘othering’ effect of a significant numbers of ethnic Chinese people, who felt that they are being treated as foreigners by their own compatriots.

What seems to be at stake here is who has the legitimacy to represent the authentic Chinese language and culture. Many of the teachers seem to assume that by virtue of being born and brought up in China they have a better understanding of what Chinese culture is and can represent it better than the immigrants and their children. The immigrants and their children, on the other hand, seem to feel that they have preserved the traditional Chinese culture better and regard the young teachers as rather naïve, or worse, have lost the Chinese tradition. The battle is sure to continue, as it is an issue facing all diasporas (see further Kramersch, 2012).

Summary and Conclusion

For centuries, China thought that its own culture and language was all it needed. The shocks of foreign invasion and occupation of the 19th and early 20th century put that misconception to rest. Successive post-imperial governments in China have used a discourse of national humiliation to stir up nationalist sentiments (e.g. Callahan, 2004). In the 21st century, the world seems to be trying to learn Mandarin to further its chances of success in a new world order and to understand the basics of Chinese culture. China seems to have taken this global change to heart with huge investment in the Confucius Institutes and classrooms worldwide. In promoting the language as soft power, China, through the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms is implementing its geopolitical strategy and creating vital space for stability, growth and long-term gains through language.

The funding and support that come with the CIs and CCs are particularly welcome. Chinese language teaching also seems to serve the UK government’s geopolitical strategies, as Britain wants to maintain her international role. The UK is competing directly with China in many of the former British colonies for resources and politico-cultural influence. The promotion of Chinese teaching is also timely as far as UK universities and schools are concerned, as there has been a major decline of the number of students taking modern foreign languages

So far, however, very little attention has been paid to the implications of the proliferation of the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms for modern foreign language teaching and learning. Our study clearly shows that there are very different motivations for universities and schools to want to set up Chinese classes, for the teachers to teach in the CIs and CCs and for the students to choose to do Chinese. These different motivations may be due to different ideologies. But it seems that on the whole pragmatic and personal considerations are the key factors. Whilst the

policy makers for the promotion of Chinese through CIs and CCs would like to use the teaching of the Chinese language to promote the Chinese culture as well, in practice the cultural element taught by the teachers is restricted to fairly stereotypical customs and traditions. Some students even question the legitimacy and authenticity of the teachers as representatives of the Chinese culture, which raises an important yet hitherto under-explored issue of the role of the language teacher in mediating culture and cultural knowledge. In this regard, the status of the ethnic Chinese students is particularly interesting. Despite their heritage connections with China, these ethnic Chinese students have not been a main concern of Hanban's policies. They are often treated in the same way as all other 'foreign students' learning Chinese. In some cases, the situation is worse, as the ethnic Chinese students are regarded as too troublesome to teach, requiring additional and specific attention from the teachers. They feel being 'othered' in the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms.

In the meantime, the British universities and schools that host the CIs and CCs seem largely unaware of the 'othering' effect on the ethnic Chinese students. Of all the ethnic minority groups, the Chinese have traditionally done very well in the education system in the UK. And as such, they are often neglected by the policy makers. Should, then, the UK government and policy makers be concerned about the 'othering' of the ethnic Chinese students in the CIs and CCs? As UK nationals, they should definitely be a concern for the UK education authorities. But a much broader issue seems to be about the impact of language learning on community cohesion and community relations. The promotion of Mandarin, while welcomed from a global perspective, has been met with hostile reactions both in the so-called dialect speakers within China and increasingly in the Chinese diasporas. Some community leaders are voicing their concerns that their children are no longer able to communicate with the parents and grandparents, not because they speak English, but because they are now speaking Mandarin. One Chinese language's gain seems to have led to another Chinese language's loss. This surely should be a concern for all those who are interested in the future of Chinese and any language.

References

- Ang, Ien (2001) *On Not Speaking Chinese*. London: Routledge
- Bounds, Gwendolyn (2010) "How Handwriting Trains the Brain" *The Wall Street Journal*, October .
- Callahan, William A. (2004) National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism. *Alternatives* 29, 199–218

- Flowerdew, John (2012) *Critical Discourse Analysis in Historiography: The Case of Hong Kong's Evolving Political Identity*. Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Gil, J.A., 2009. China's Confucius Institute Project: language and soft power in world politics. *The Global Studies Journal*, 2(1), 59-72
- Gil, Jeffrey (2008) The Promotion of Chinese Language Learning and China's Soft Power *Asian Social Science* Vol 4, No 10, pp. 116-122
- Gwendolyn Bounds, "How Handwriting Trains the Brain" *The Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2010
- Hobsbawm, Eric & Ranger, Terrence (eds) (1983). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press
- Kramsch, Claire (1998) *Language and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Kramsch, Claire (2012) Imposture: A Late Modern Notion in Poststructuralist SLA Research. *Applied Linguistics*, 33(5): 483-502
- Li Wei (2013) Complementary classrooms for multilingual minority ethnic children as a translanguaging space. In Jasone Cenoz and Durk Dorter (eds) *Multilingual Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Li Wei and Zhu Hua (2011) Voices from the diaspora: Changing hierarchies and dynamics of Chinese multilingualism. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 205 pp. 155–171
- Li, Hsi Chang, Mirmirani, Sam, and Ilacqua, Joseph A (2009) "Confucius Institutes: Distributed leadership and knowledge sharing in a worldwide network", *Learning Organization*, Vol. 16 Issue: 6, pp.469 – 482
- Pan, Esther (2006) "[China's Soft Power Initiative](http://www.cfr.org/china/chinas-soft-power-initiative/p10715#p2)". <http://www.cfr.org/china/chinas-soft-power-initiative/p10715#p2> Retrieved 12 February 2013.
- Paradise, James F. (2009) China and International Harmony: The Role of Confucius Institutes in Bolstering Beijing's Soft Power. *Asian Survey* Vol. 49, No. 4, pp. 647-669
- Stanley-Baker, Joan (2010/05), *Ink Painting Today*, **10**, Centered on Taipei, pp. 8–11, http://www.communitycenter.org.tw/sites/default/files/documents/publications/cot/COT_201005.pdf
- Starr, Don (2009), [Chinese Language Education in Europe: the Confucius Institutes](#), *European Journal of Education* Volume 44, Issue 1, pages 78–79
- Tang, Yiyuan, Zhang, Wutian, Chen, Kewei, Feng, Shigang, Ji, Ye, Shen, Junxian, Reiman, Eric M. & Liu, Yijun (2006) Arithmetic processing in the brain shaped by cultures *PNAS* 103 (28) 10775-10780

- White, Louise, Allan-Rae, John & Fisher, Darell. (2001) "Asian Success in our schools – A Challenge?." <http://www.aare.edu.au/01pap/whi011153.htm> (accessed on February 11, 2013)
- Yang, Rui (2010) Soft power and higher education: an examination of China's Confucius Institutes. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*. Vol. 8, No. 2, pages 235-245
- Yiyuan Tang, Wutian Zhang, Kewei Chen, Shigang Feng, Ye Ji, Junxian Shen, Eric M. Reiman, & Yijun Liu 2006 "Arithmetic processing in the brain shaped by cultures PNAS 103 (28) 10775-10780
- Zhao, Hongqin and Huang [Jianbin](#) (2010) China's policy of Chinese as a foreign language and the use of overseas Confucius Institutes. [Educational Research for Policy and Practice](#). Volume 9, [Issue 2](#), pp 127-142