

## Unearthing the marks on the road of Chinese language education in Zambia

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### ABSTRACT

As China strengthens its economic, political, and cultural engagement with Zambia, Mandarin has emerged as a significant linguistic resource for academic mobility, employment, and cross-cultural communication. Despite this rapid expansion, limited empirical evidence exists on the lessons drawn from the operational and pedagogical experiences of the Chinese Institute of the University of Zambia (CIUNZA). A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. The study was informed by the cultural globalization theory. The study randomly sampled 45 CIUNZA students and purposively sampled 4 alumni, 2 Zambian and 2 Chinese instructors, 4 administrators, and 2 employers. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS to determine levels of agreement and trends in motivations and perceptions. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed to identify emerging patterns related to institutional management, learner experiences, and sociocultural dynamics. The findings indicate that the growth of Mandarin education in Zambia is driven by supportive sociopolitical relations between Zambia and China. Over 80% of learners reported instrumental motivations, citing improved job opportunities with Chinese enterprises and enhanced global competitiveness. However, challenges emerged, including limited local teacher capacity, insufficient contextualized teaching materials, inconsistent curriculum integration, and dependence on Chinese funding and expertise. Stakeholders emphasized the need for sustainable local ownership, curriculum localization, and stronger government policy alignment. Chinese language education in Zambia has achieved significant growth, anchored in institutional partnerships and learner aspirations shaped by global economic shifts. However, its sustainability depends on improved management structures, enhanced teacher development, and policies that balance external support with national educational priorities. In conclusion, the study showed that Zambia's experience with Chinese language education programmes indicate substantial progress in cultural exchange, learner enthusiasm, and perceived relevance of the Chinese language. On the other hand, the study also unearthed the pedagogical challenges that must be addressed for sustainable growth and continuity with national ownership. The study recommends strengthening local teacher training programs, developing Zambia-specific Mandarin teaching materials, integrating Mandarin into national language policy frameworks, and enhancing monitoring and evaluation systems for language outcomes. It further suggests that Zambia pursue a more balanced cultural exchange model that promotes mutual linguistic and cultural understanding while safeguarding educational sovereignty.

**Keywords:** Confucius Institute, Cultural Norms, Language Policy, Mandarin, Teacher Training

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Education is a capital investment for any nation and is recognised as an important tool for social and economic development. It is associated with the personal, social, economic and cultural aspects of a human being thereby underpinning the goal of a sustainable society. Multilingual education has been supported that it can improve learning outcomes. Literacy has been recognised as fundamental human right and learning in mother tongue can help learners at a lower level grasp understanding. In Zambia, most of the people are multilingual, and it is therefore it has been very easy for them to integrate Mandarin alongside English and local languages (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2024; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003). Education leads to better attainment of health, nutritional statuses, economic growth, population control and empowerment of people in society. So achievement in learning is very vital.

According to researchers, education enables youth and people of all ages irrespective of cultural and social background to face the challenge of development, especially with regard to eradicating poverty both at individual and national level. The youths that drop out of school end up with resource constraints in classrooms. These realities present both challenges and opportunities for Zambia's language education system, inviting a closer look at how integrating foreign language education can help align with and augment existing educational policies and outcomes. This is because education functions first to train people to attain specific and self-determining opinions, investigation

and problem-solving skills and knowledge needed to make informed decisions on a personal level as well as broader national level that can be empowering for women (Senevirathne, 2024).

The learning of foreign language affects somebody's culture. As you learn the other language you learn their culture too. Culture refers to what people do daily in their lives. Mkandawire and Daka (2018, p.140) note that "Culture is perceived as people's way of life that impinges on every aspect of their daily practices." Zambia has had challenges with harmonizing multilingual realities which affects learners' culture with a predominantly English based curriculum. The history of using English in Zambia and most African countries can be traced to life before modernization and colonization. In pre-colonial Zambia, there was no formal education, and the issue of multilingual was unheard of in people's communities. Zambia like most African countries was organised in small groups usually in family clans and this was an oral society from time immemorial Kafusha et al., 2021).

Communication by most of the people in Zambia then during their traditional education which relied on oral histories, including the telling of creation myths, proverbs and folktales passed down through generations was mostly in than clan language (Chita, 2011). However, the introduction of formal education by the 'colonialists' when they came to settle in Zambia in the 1800s brought a shift to the way information and knowledge ought to be shared. However, this method of knowledge has each nation's language of instruction policies significantly affect learning outcomes (Hambulo et al., 2025). If Mandarin is positioned as a foreign language rather than a medium of instruction, Zambia should see how to integrate it within an already complex linguistic system that already exists. This includes questions about the level at which the foreign language should be introduced, the balance between cultural and linguistic components and how learners transition between their home languages, English and Mandarin (Hambulo et al., 2025).

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

The way foreign language education is introduced in most African countries including Zambia, relies heavily on external support of those countries. In addition, the initiators of teaching are mostly volunteers, and furthermore the teaching materials used are mostly imported (Xinhua, 2020). Even though the stated factors help to rapidly scale up the foreign language education implementation, sustainability becomes a challenge in most cases. When external support is halted, such programmes also come to an end. There are a lot of donor funded projects that closed when external funding ceased. Cessation of funding can be as a result of donor fatigue or due to other natural calamities in the world. The COVID-19 pandemic is one example of a world calamity that resulted into many donor funded projects to close. Therefore, without systematic efforts to integrate into local existing structures, or train local foreign language instructors, and development of local teaching resources, the long-term viability of foreign language education remained uncertain. This dependency problem highlighted the need for empirical research to investigate whether Zambia was developing sufficient internal capacity to support Mandarin instruction independently of external actors.

The above concerns gives a knowledge gap that even if foreign countries like china wants to expand Chinese language education in Zambia, marks of such implementation should be unearthed to inform future language planning. Evidences from such studies will help develop a strong policy alignment document, resource sustainability and cultural implications. These issues will also ensure that the growth of Chinese education contributes meaningfully to Zambia's human capital development rather than creating new dependencies within the educational and cultural spheres.

### **1.2 Research Objective**

To examine the lessons drawn from the operational and pedagogical experiences of Chinese Institute of the University of Zambia (CIUNZA)

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Theoretical Review**

#### **2.1.1 Diffusion of Innovation Theory**

This study was informed by Diffusion of Innovations Theory by Rogers (2003), which explains how new ideas, practices, or technologies are communicated and adopted over time within a social system. This Theory was developed by Everett Rogers and explains how new ideas, practices, or technologies spread within a social system over time through processes of communication and adoption which includes foreign language (Guo & Huang, 2024). This theory was very applicable and relevant to this study because the introduction and expansion of the foreign language like Chinese in Zambia could be understood as an innovation diffusing of a different culture through educational institutions, communities, and policy structures of Zambia. Accordingly, he stated that diffusion occurs through five key stages which are knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation and confirmation (Sahin, 2006)

and these stages provided a useful framework for examining how Mandarin language education was being introduced and taken up in Zambia.

The Theory emphasizes that adoption of foreign language cannot occur uniformly across all groups, but rather that individuals adopt innovations at different rates. This theoretical perspective therefore provides a guide on the pace, direction and sustainability of Chinese diffusion in Zambia's education sector and community. The theory also allows this study to help understand the adoption of Chinese language education by Zambian students, educators, and policymakers. In the case of Zambia, establishment of Confucius Institute (CI) programs in Zambia provides an opportunity to examine both the opportunities and challenges associated with foreign language education. Literature shows evidence from multiple studies unveiling the interplay of learner desire, teacher training and community engagement in shaping program effectiveness.

## 2.2 Empirical Review

Studies which have been conducted provide some important insights into the processes explained in the theoretical framework above through Diffusion Innovation Theory. The studies show understanding of how Chinese language has diffused into different parts of the world. Despite evidences from literature showing consistent highlights for the demand of Chinese language, implementation processes has not harmonised in line with national educational priorities and communities.

In the United Kingdom especially researchers have documented the pivotal role of Confucius Institutes (CIs) in institutionalising Chinese language. From the work by Starr (2009) on influential analysis laid the foundation of learning from the qualitative examination of policy documents, institutional reports, and government–university collaboration frameworks. Starr provided a thorough overview of the Chinese government's cultural diplomacy agenda through positioning Confucius Institutes in different countries as a central instrument of promoting international Chinese language study. Currently, Europe is the region with the highest concentration of CIs. From Starr's findings, it is revealed that CIs have significantly expanded access to Chinese language learning across educational levels, from low level to tertiary level education. Through these CIs, Chinese government have facilitated structured curricula, delivered teaching resources, and contributed to increased public awareness of Chinese language and culture.

Coming to Zambia, the existing literature from Chansa (2021), Kangwa (2023), Zhong et al. (2021), Mwenda (2023) and Mubanga (2022) provides important insights into how Zambia has implemented Chinese language education. The lessons have not yet been documented to guide policy on funding, integration of the language into Zambian education system and sustainability of the programme. The studies done focused on current Zambians attitudes, challenges with infrastructure and policy alignment. The studies have not done much on learner development, program outcomes and long-term socio-economic effects. For instance, Mwenda (2023) documented learner aspirations but didn't link motivation with educational performance. Additionally, Zhong et al. (2021) revealed the important ideological tensions between learners and teachers but failed the analysis to assess how such tensions affect classroom practices. Collectively, Zambian studies lack longitudinal, proficiency-based, and policy-integrated analyses that can robustly explain how Chinese language education programmes function and what outcomes they produce.

Finally at all levels of education internationally there is a consistent insufficient examination of teacher preparedness, curriculum localization, classroom pedagogy, and assessment systems. Studies such as Kangwa (2023), Mutolwa (2019) and Liu (2013) highlight teacher shortages, limited Curriculum Profession Development, and over reliance on foreign teaching materials. Despite all these evidence, the empirical evaluations of teaching effectiveness, classroom practices, or the suitability of Chinese textbooks in multilingual Zambian contexts. The literature on how Chinese instruction interacts with Zambia's multilingual classrooms is missing. Furthermore, there is no comprehensive research on how Chinese could be integrated into Zambia's national language policy framework. A study by Chishiba and Manchishi (2016) further demonstrated that there is no policy on structured third-language policy in Zambia.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a Qualitative approach. A case study design was chosen for this study to collect in-depth and detailed information from Confucius Institute of the University of Zambia. The population included all 45 CIUNZA students, all Zambian and Chinese instructors and administrators from the Ministry of Education. The population also included the employees of CIUNZA. From this population, all 45 CIUNZA were picked and 2 Zambian and 2 Chinese instructors and 4 administrators from the Ministry of Education were selected using purposive sampling.

For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was employed to select participants with deep information about what was in the research objectives. Two focus group discussions were conducted with learners who are

studying Chinese language, involving 8 students per group, to capture diverse learner experiences and motivations. From all these participants, the information collected provided in-depth insights into the policy, cultural, pedagogical, and learner dimensions of Chinese language education in Zambia.

The interviews and discussions generated qualitative data on institutional management, policy alignment, and sociocultural influences. Data collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes. Data from the questionnaires was analysed using descriptive analysis where frequencies and percentages were calculated.

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Findings

The findings revealed several key lessons from Zambia's experience with Chinese language education. Perceptions of institutional management indicated mixed views, as 30.0% of respondents remained neutral on whether the Confucius Institute was effectively managed, while equal proportions agreed (20.0%) or strongly agreed (20.0%), and a combined 30.0% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In contrast, respondents reported overwhelmingly positive outcomes regarding cross-cultural relations, with 46.7% agreeing and 40.0% strongly agreeing that Chinese language education had improved interactions between Zambians and Chinese, and only one respondent (3.3%) expressing strong disagreement.

The results further demonstrated a pronounced call for increased Zambian participation in Mandarin instruction, as  $n = 12$  (26.7%) agreed and  $n = 27$  (60.0%) strongly agreed that more local involvement was necessary. This sentiment extended to institutional investment, where the majority strongly supported the idea that Zambia should develop its own Mandarin teaching infrastructure, with 56.7% strongly agreeing and an additional 16.7% agreeing, compared to a small minority who disagreed or strongly disagreed (13.3%).

Respondents also expressed confidence in the broader applicability of the model, as 40.0% agreed and 36.7% strongly agreed that the Chinese language education initiative could serve as a template for introducing other foreign languages, while only 6.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The strongest consensus emerged regarding the need for deeper collaboration with local universities, where 76.7% strongly agreed that partnerships with Zambian higher education institutions would strengthen the programme, and only one participant (3.3%) agreed minimally.

**Table 1**

*Lessons Drawn from Zambia's Experience with Chinese Language Education %*

Expressions	SD	D	N	A	SA
The Confucius Institute is effectively managed and coordinated.	10.0	20.0	30.0	20.0	20.0
Chinese language education has improved cross-cultural relations between Zambians and Chinese.	3.3	0.0	10.0	46.7	40.0
There is a need for more local (Zambian) involvement in Mandarin instruction.	0.0	3.3	10.0	26.7	60.0
Zambia should invest in building its own Mandarin language teaching infrastructure.	10.0	3.3	13.3	16.7	56.7
The Chinese language education initiative could serve as a model for learning other foreign languages.	3.3	3.3	16.7	40.0	36.7
More partnerships with local universities would strengthen Chinese language education in Zambia.	6.7	0.0	13.3	3.3	76.7

The qualitative findings reveal several important lessons regarding the delivery, management, and sustainability of Chinese language education in Zambia, particularly as implemented through the Confucius Institute at the University of Zambia. A prominent theme emerging from the learner discussions relates to instructional effectiveness. Participants highlighted that Mandarin learning largely occurs within the classroom, with limited opportunities to practice the language in real-life contexts. As Respondent 10 (12/08/2025) noted, "*Here at UNZA, we only speak it in class,*" indicating that learners perceive a need for more immersive and practical learning environments where they can apply their skills beyond formal lessons. This finding shows the importance of integrating experiential and application-based approaches to enhance language acquisition.

Learners also emphasized the value of interactive learning strategies. Engagement with native speakers and digital platforms was identified as a key factor in improving language fluency and cultural competence. Respondent 8 (18/08/2025) recommended, "*online platforms to interact with Chinese students or mentors.*"

Equity and transparency in programme administration emerged as another important theme. Some learners perceived favouritism in the allocation of opportunities such as scholarships, trips to China, or special projects. This was viewed as a demotivating factor, potentially undermining confidence and trust in the programme. Participants

suggested that transparent and equitable selection processes would enhance motivation and reinforce the credibility of the programs.

Finally, learners stressed the importance of public sensitization and the integration of Chinese cultural materials into mainstream societal spaces. Respondents recommended various media strategies, including television programs, podcasts, and the promotion of Chinese literature through bookstores. As Respondent 7 (2/09/2025) stated, *“They should use media such as TV programs and podcasts to sensitize the community,”* while Respondent 14 added, *“They should promote Chinese literature in bookstores such as Bookworld or Bookhut.”* These measures were seen as important for increasing the visibility of Mandarin education, normalizing its study within the broader Zambian society, and fostering an appreciation of Chinese language and culture among the general public.

Another key lesson relates to the system’s dependence on volunteer teachers from China, which has created recurring disruptions. The Ministry explained that some schools have been unable to sustain teaching when volunteers leave, as was the case during COVID-19. According to Respondent 5 (7/09/2025), *“some schools that had enrolled for Chinese language examination at Grade 9... were not able to sit for those exams because the volunteer teachers left... and could not come back.”*

This experience revealed the need to develop local capacity, with the Ministry (Respondent 1, 30/09/2025) stressing that *“we need sustenance by having Zambian-Chinese teachers.”* Encouragingly, the Confucius Institute has recognized this gap and introduced in-service training for Zambian teachers, a development the Ministry (Respondent 2, 18/09/2025) described positively stating that, *“Confucius has realized this gap... They have come up with a deliberate initiative of training in-service teachers... there is light at the end of the tunnel.”*

In discussing policy challenges and implications, the Ministry highlighted several constraints that need to be addressed for sustainable growth. The first relates to teaching and learning materials, which remain inadequate. As stated by the Respondent 4 (15/08/2025), *“we have a challenge of teaching and learning materials. We hope that with the 2023 curriculum, at least Chinese language is on board.”*

Overall, the Ministry emphasized the need for stronger policies that address teacher training, material development, and curriculum alignment. Respondent 3 (22/09/2025) explained that *“the challenges can inform policy... There is a need for Zambian teachers, materials, and integration at the right level.”*

Lecturer interviews revealed several lessons emerging from more than a decade of Mandarin language instruction under CIUNZA. One clear lesson concerns the importance of contextualising teaching methods. Lecturers stated that although language instruction has been largely successful, challenges persist in aligning Chinese pedagogical approaches with Zambian learning styles. Respondent 6 (30/08/2025) noted that *“we have realised the need to adapt teaching methods so that they fit local learning patterns; what works in China does not always work here.”*

In addition, lecturers highlighted the importance of strengthening collaboration across institutions. Experiences show that partnerships between CIUNZA, schools, government units, and the private sector are important for scaling up Mandarin programmes. Respondent 5 (25/08/2025) stated that *“strong collaboration is the only way to ensure sustainability because no single institution can manage all aspects alone.”*

Overall, Zambia’s experience with Chinese language education demonstrates both meaningful progress and the need for strategic improvements. The establishment of Confucius Institutes and Mandarin programs in schools has created valuable avenues for cultural exchange, skill development, and academic opportunity. Learners’ positive attitudes, combined with growing recognition of Mandarin’s economic relevance, show that the foundation is strong. However, persistent challenges such as limited teaching materials, a shortage of trained local instructors, and misconceptions about the purpose of learning Mandarin show areas requiring attention. Strengthening teacher capacity, expanding partnerships, and tailoring teaching approaches to Zambia’s context will be essential for sustaining and improving the impact of Chinese language education in the country.

The findings from this study reveal several key lessons about how Chinese language has evolved in Zambia, how it has been managed and also the lessons of sustainability. These findings have been in consistent with findings from other countries. On the management of Confucius Institutes, less than half agreed that CIs have been well managed which is in agreement Starr (2009) and Lahtinen (2015) studies. Similar concerns have been documented in Kenya where management inconsistencies have shaped public perceptions of CI-led programmes (Mbugua & Iraki, 2022).

This study showed the call for investment in Zambia’s own Chinese teaching infrastructure. This aligns with what was documented by Liu and Li (2024). Additionally, the Chinese language education has been confined to classrooms and not applies in the communities. Learners’ call for interactive practice and real-world application cannot be underestimated. This calls for pedagogical reform that integrates practice-oriented type of learning to Zambian learning environments (Mkandawire & Daka, 2018).

From a policy point of view, this study revealed that the Ministry of education desires the use of locally produced materials as compared to foreign resources. These resources are supposed to start from Primary level up to Tertiary level as compared to current situation where foreign instruction only begins at secondary level. This inhibit

early proficiency development as seen in other countries where foreign language acquisition begins in early childhood education (Chen, 2025).

The situation where CIUNZA provides structured syllabi and standardized learning materials from China fails to be in line with the curriculum for Zambia's educational needs. Teaching such results in teaching content that sometimes feels disconnected from Zambia's sociocultural context. This agrees with the study by Mwansa and Chileshe (2018) where findings showed that only 40% of Mandarin programmes reflected local curricular needs. This reduces student engagement beyond examination preparation. This is also due to lack of National policy as highlighted by Chishiba and Manchishi (2016) where CIUNZA operates in a policy vacuum.

Lastly but not the least is on the fact that there is uneven level of teacher preparation especially the locally trained instructors. The locally trained instructors have challenges with pedagogical approaches, managing multilingual classrooms and also opportunities for continuous professional development. These findings are consistent with Kangwa (2023) study that revealed that less than 20% of Zambian language teachers felt adequately prepared to teach non-core languages like Chinese. The issues of lack of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for Zambian local instructors were also revealed in the study by Mutolwa (2019).

From the above findings and discussion, the marks on the road from the Zambia's experience with Chinese language education programmes indicate substantial progress in cultural exchange, learner enthusiasm, and perceived relevance of Chinese language. On the other hand, the study has unearthed the pedagogical challenges that must be addressed for sustainable growth and continuity with national ownership.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

Several lessons emerged from Zambia's experience with Chinese language education. There has been an improvement on the cross-cultural relations between Zambians and Chinese as a result of language learning. In order to have sustainable Mandarin programmes, there is need to have increased Zambian involvement in teaching, curriculum development, and institutional management. Lastly, there is need to train local Zambians and develop localised teaching materials to standardise the curriculum. This must be in line with the government policy of curriculum development for sustainability of the programme.

### 5.2 Recommendations

In order to improve Chinese education in Zambia, the following should be taken into consideration. There is need to prioritize the training of Zambian local teachers to reduce long-term dependency on expatriate volunteers. It is also important to develop local teaching materials which can easily be applied in the communities. There is need to come up with the policy for curriculum integration of foreign language from primary to tertiary than just from secondary.

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