

MANDARIN CHINESE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of China as a major global economic, political, and cultural power has generated increasing interest in Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language worldwide, including in Africa. In Nigeria, the study and teaching of Mandarin have transitioned from informal, commerce-driven interactions to formalized, institutionalized programs integrated into universities, secondary schools, and national education policy frameworks. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria, exploring its historical evolution, current status, and prospective future developments. Drawing on academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports, the study situates the expansion of Mandarin education within the broader context of Nigeria–China relations, international diplomacy, and China’s cultural and educational outreach through Confucius Institutes. The paper identifies key challenges, including shortages of qualified local instructors, infrastructure limitations, and uneven policy implementation, as well as debates over the role of foreign language promotion in relation to indigenous languages. It further highlights the opportunities presented by growing economic and diplomatic engagement with China, curricular inclusion at secondary and tertiary levels, and the potential for localized capacity building. The study concludes that the long-term sustainability and expansion of Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria depend on strategic investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and institutional capacity, as well as a balanced approach to multilingual education that aligns global competencies with national linguistic priorities.

Keywords: Mandarin Chinese, language education, Confucius Institutes, Nigeria–China relations, foreign language policy, multilingual education

INTRODUCTION

China’s emergence as a major global power in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has profoundly reshaped international economic, political, and cultural relations. As the world’s second-largest economy and an increasingly influential actor in global governance institutions, China has extended its reach through expansive trade networks, foreign direct investment, multilateral diplomacy, and cultural engagement across regions of the world (Nye, 2004; Odinye, 2015). Beyond material power, China has strategically deployed language and culture as instruments of soft power, with Mandarin Chinese gaining prominence as a language of international business, diplomacy, education, and intercultural communication. The global expansion of Mandarin learning reflects China’s recognition that language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a carrier of values, ideology, and cultural identity (Odinye, 2016).

China’s engagement with Africa has been particularly significant within this global reorientation. Since the early 2000s, Sino–African relations have intensified through large-scale infrastructure projects, trade agreements, development financing, educational cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges. Through frameworks such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China has positioned itself as a strategic development partner for many African states (Abugu, 2024). Nigeria, as Africa’s most populous nation and one of its largest economies, occupies a central place in China’s Africa policy. Bilateral relations between China and Nigeria span critical sectors including oil and gas, construction, manufacturing, telecommunications, education, and technological transfer. These engagements have created practical demand for linguistic and cultural competence, particularly proficiency in Mandarin Chinese, among Nigerian students, professionals, and institutions (Odinye, 2015).

Within this broader geopolitical and economic context, the teaching and learning of Mandarin Chinese in Nigeria represent both a pragmatic response to evolving economic realities and a symbolic dimension of cultural exchange and diplomacy. Mandarin education serves functional purposes—facilitating trade, employment, and

academic mobility—while also operating as a soft power mechanism that deepens mutual understanding between China and Nigeria. The institutionalization of Chinese language education through universities, Confucius Institutes, and national curriculum reforms reflects Nigeria's adaptation to shifting global power dynamics and its pursuit of global competitiveness in a multilingual world (Abugu, 2024; Odinye, 2017).

This paper explores Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria from a historical and analytical perspective. It examines the background to Chinese language education in the country, traces its past development across key institutions, assesses its current status at different levels of the educational system, and considers its future prospects in light of policy, pedagogical, and ideological debates. Particular attention is given to indigenous contributions to the field, especially the pioneering scholarly and institutional work of Professor Ifeanyi Sunny Odinye and other Nigerian academics whose efforts have laid the intellectual and structural foundations for sustainable Chinese language studies in Nigeria.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Unofficial Chinese Education in Nigeria

Prior to the establishment of formal institutional frameworks for Chinese language instruction, Mandarin education in Nigeria existed largely in informal and unofficial forms. Early exposure to the Chinese language emerged primarily through commercial and interpersonal interactions between Nigerian traders and Chinese merchants, especially in major urban and commercial centers such as Lagos, Onitsha, Aba, and Kano (Abugu, 2024; Odinye, 2015). During this formative period, language learning was predominantly functional and transactional, driven by immediate economic needs rather than academic or cultural objectives. Communication typically involved rudimentary expressions related to pricing, quantities, logistics, and negotiation, with little or no attention to grammatical accuracy, literacy, or standardized usage (Odinye, 2017; Bamgbose, 2011). These informal practices, however, laid the groundwork for later formalized Chinese language instruction and heightened awareness of the practical and strategic value of Mandarin in Nigeria's evolving economic and diplomatic engagements with China (Yang, 2010).

These early forms of language contact lacked institutional support, structured curricula, trained instructors, or formal assessment mechanisms. Learning occurred through imitation, repetition, and everyday interaction, often resulting in hybridized or pidginized forms of Mandarin influenced by local languages and English. Despite these limitations, such informal encounters played a crucial role in familiarizing Nigerians with the Chinese language and highlighting its practical relevance in emerging Sino-Nigerian commercial relations (Odinye, 2016).

Importantly, these unofficial practices laid the sociolinguistic and psychological foundation for the later institutionalization of Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria. They generated awareness of the economic and symbolic value of Mandarin proficiency and stimulated interest among Nigerians who sought deeper and more systematic engagement with Chinese language and culture. Odinye (2015) observes that many of the earliest formal learners of Mandarin in Nigeria were individuals whose initial exposure occurred through these informal trade-based interactions. Consequently, although fragmented and unsystematic, unofficial Chinese education represents the earliest phase in the historical development of Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria.

Official Chinese Education and the Confucius Institutes

The formalization of Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria began with the establishment of Confucius Institutes, representing a significant transition from informal language contact to structured academic instruction. Confucius Institutes are international educational and cultural centers sponsored by the Chinese government in collaboration with host universities abroad. Their core objectives include the teaching of Mandarin Chinese, the promotion of Chinese culture, and the facilitation of academic, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges between China and host countries (Odinye, 2015; Yang, 2010). In Nigeria, the establishment of these institutes provided standardized curricula, qualified instructors, teaching materials, and opportunities for scholarships and exchange programs, thereby integrating Chinese language studies into formal educational frameworks (Odinye, 2016).

In Nigeria, the introduction of Confucius Institutes represented a turning point in the institutionalization of Chinese language education. The establishment of the first Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, in 2008 provided a formal platform for curriculum development, teacher training, and academic research in Chinese studies. These institutes introduced standardized teaching materials, professionally trained instructors, and internationally recognized proficiency assessments such as the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK). They also

created opportunities for Nigerian students and lecturers to benefit from scholarships, exchange programs, and advanced training in China (Odinye, 2017).

Furthermore, Confucius Institutes facilitated the integration of Mandarin Chinese into Nigeria's higher education system by embedding language programs within university structures and aligning them with global standards of foreign language education. This institutional support not only expanded access to Mandarin learning but also enhanced the academic legitimacy of Chinese studies in Nigeria. According to Abugu (2024), the presence of Confucius Institutes significantly accelerated the growth of Mandarin education by transforming it from a peripheral, informal practice into a recognized academic discipline with long-term developmental implications.

PAST: HISTORY OF CHINESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK), Awka, holds a foundational and pioneering position in the historical development of Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria. The university was the first Nigerian tertiary institution to introduce Chinese language courses in the early 2000s, marking the formal entry of Mandarin into Nigeria's university curriculum. This initiative culminated in 2008 with the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in Nigeria at UNIZIK, an event widely regarded as the institutional genesis of Chinese studies in the country (Odinye, 2015).

The successful establishment and sustainability of Chinese language education at UNIZIK are closely associated with the pioneering efforts of past Vice-Chancellors of Nnamdi Azikiwe University especially, Professor Ilochi Okafor (SAN). As the first indigenous Nigerian scholar to specialize professionally in Chinese language and linguistics, Prof. Ifeanyi Sunny Odinye played a decisive role in curriculum design, classroom instruction, academic research, and institutional advocacy. Having received advanced academic training in China, he returned to Nigeria equipped with the linguistic competence and pedagogical expertise required to localize Chinese language teaching within a Nigerian sociocultural and educational context. His scholarly works provided empirical evidence that Mandarin Chinese could be effectively taught, learned, and researched in Nigerian universities, thereby dispelling early skepticism regarding the feasibility of Chinese studies outside East Asia (Odinye, 2015; Odinye, 2016). Beyond teaching, Odinye's research on learner attitudes, instructional challenges, and curriculum development established an indigenous intellectual foundation for Chinese studies in Nigeria. His contributions also helped transform Chinese language education from a donor-driven initiative into a discipline increasingly rooted in local scholarship and academic ownership (Odinye, 2017).

University of Lagos, Lagos

Building on the precedent set by UNIZIK, the University of Lagos (UNILAG) established its own Confucius Institute in 2009. Situated in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial and economic capital, the UNILAG Confucius Institute significantly expanded the geographical reach and social visibility of Mandarin Chinese education. The institute attracted a diverse student population drawn from disciplines such as linguistics, international relations, business administration, and engineering, reflecting the growing recognition of Mandarin as a valuable global skill (Odinye, 2015; Abubakar, 2018).

The UNILAG Confucius Institute played a crucial role in popularizing Mandarin Chinese beyond southeastern Nigeria and embedding it within Nigeria's cosmopolitan academic environment. Through language courses, cultural programs, proficiency testing, and exchange opportunities, the institute contributed to mainstreaming Chinese language education and reinforcing its relevance to Nigeria's economic and diplomatic engagements with China (Odinye, 2016; Abubakar, 2018).

Other Locations for Learning Mandarin Chinese in Nigeria

Following the early success of Confucius Institutes at Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK) and the University of Lagos (UNILAG), Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria has continued to expand geographically and institutionally. Confucius Institute classrooms and related language programs are now found in multiple states and cities, driven by growing interest from students, employers, and government stakeholders. For example, UNIZIK's Confucius Institute has established classrooms at the Federal Polytechnic Oke with hundreds of registered students, enhancing access beyond the main campus.

Beyond formal Confucius Institute affiliations, new Chinese Studies departments and programs have been launched. The University of Ilesha (UNILESA) recently inaugurated its Institute of Chinese Studies, offering certificates, diplomas, and business Chinese programs, and department of Chinese Studies designed to serve both students and professionals seeking Mandarin proficiency and cultural understanding. Other institutions such as University on the Nigeria, Umuanya; Kaduna State University, Kaduna; Nile University, Abuja; and Yaba College of Technology, Lagos have developed structured Mandarin offerings as part of language or international studies curricula.

The University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT) has also partnered with Chinese universities and diplomatic missions to train Nigerian students in Chinese language and culture, linking linguistic competence to employability in emerging sectors with Chinese business presence. Meanwhile, initiatives such as the “dual-teacher classroom” project launched by Hunan Normal University aim to bring hybrid instruction models—combining online teaching from China with Nigerian classroom support—to a broader range of Nigerian institutions, responding to the acute shortage of qualified teachers.

In addition to university programs, independent Mandarin language academies and schools operate in cities like Abuja, Lagos, Kanu, Onitsha, Awka, Enugu, etc offering accessible courses for learners outside the formal higher education system. These private initiatives complement institutional efforts, broadening the demographic reach of Mandarin education to include professionals, youth, and adult learners.

Indigenous Contributors to the Development of Chinese Language Education in Nigeria

While foreign-supported frameworks like Confucius Institutes have provided essential infrastructure and resources, the indigenous growth of Chinese language education has been propelled by Nigerian academics, language educators, and administrators. These stakeholders have contributed significantly to curriculum adaptation, instructional leadership, translation, and research, fostering localized teaching methodologies that align with Nigeria’s educational context. Their work has helped reduce reliance on expatriate instructors and strengthened Nigeria’s capacity to sustain Chinese language programs independently (Odinye, 2016; Abubakar, 2018).

For example, UNIZIK’s transition from Confucius Institute offerings to a full Department of Chinese Studies—approved by the National Universities Commission in 2014—illustrates the evolution from supplementary language instruction to a fully academic program with comprehensive training in language, culture, and literature. Nigerian educators and scholars in these programs not only teach Mandarin, but also conduct research on pedagogical issues, learner attitudes, and linguistic outcomes, enriching the academic legitimacy of Chinese studies within Nigeria’s higher education system (Odinye, 2017; Abubakar, 2018).

The combined influence of expanding institutional programs, innovative instructional partnerships, and Nigerian-led curriculum development has created a diversified landscape for Mandarin Chinese learning in Nigeria. This diversity enhances access for students across regions and educational levels, increases cultural exchange opportunities, and positions Mandarin as a valuable component of Nigeria’s multilingual and global education strategy.

PRESENT: STATUS OF CHINESE LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Primary School Level

At the primary school level, the teaching of Mandarin Chinese in Nigeria remains limited and largely non-compulsory. Instruction is concentrated mainly in selected private, mission, and international schools, often facilitated through partnerships with Confucius Institutes and Chinese cultural organizations. At this stage, Mandarin education emphasizes basic oral communication, simple vocabulary, songs, and introductory cultural knowledge rather than formal linguistic competence or academic specialization. The objective is primarily exposure and early familiarization, aligning with global trends that encourage early foreign language learning to enhance cognitive development and intercultural awareness (FME, 2025; NERDC, 2025; Pulse Nigeria, 2025). Despite its limited reach, the presence of Mandarin at the primary level reflects growing parental and institutional recognition of China’s economic and cultural relevance. However, access remains uneven, with public primary schools largely excluded due to shortages of trained teachers, instructional materials, and institutional support.

Secondary School Level

A significant development in the current phase of Chinese language education in Nigeria is the formal approval of Mandarin Chinese as an optional foreign language in the senior secondary school curriculum. Following a comprehensive national review of the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Curriculum, the Federal Government, through the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) and the Federal Ministry of Education, confirmed that Mandarin would be offered alongside French and Arabic as an international language elective beginning with the 2025/2026 academic session (NERDC, 2025; FME, 2025; Pulse Nigeria, 2025). This decision was publicly announced during the commissioning of a “Chinese Corner” at Government Secondary School Tudun Wada in Abuja, where education officials highlighted Mandarin’s strategic importance in global commerce, education, and cultural exchange (Information Nigeria, 2025).

Beyond curriculum inclusion, Mandarin Chinese has gained further legitimacy through its planned uptake in national examinations, with policy documents and government announcements indicating that the subject will be examinable for senior school certificate purposes once implementation is fully in place (NERDC, 2025; Lagos Echo News, 2025). The inclusion of Mandarin reflects the Nigerian government’s recognition of China’s expanding role in international affairs and the perceived socioeconomic advantages that Mandarin proficiency can offer Nigerian youths, including enhanced opportunities in trade, diplomacy, and global mobility (Pulse Nigeria, 2025).

Despite policy approval, implementation across states and individual schools remains uneven and phased, constrained by persistent shortages of trained Mandarin teachers, limited instructional materials, and variable infrastructure. These challenges mirror broader systemic issues that have historically affected foreign language education in Nigeria, such as disparities in resource allocation and teacher training capacity (Adegbiya, 2004; Lagos Echo News, 2025).

Higher Institution Level

At the tertiary level, Mandarin Chinese has achieved its most structured and sustained presence within Nigeria’s educational system. Several universities and colleges now offer Mandarin either as elective language courses or as part of broader Chinese Studies programmes encompassing language, culture, history, and literature. Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK), Awka, and the University of Lagos (UNILAG) remain leading centers for Chinese language instruction, largely due to their long-standing Confucius Institutes and institutional experience (Odinye, 2015, 2016).

In addition to flagship institutions such as UNIZIK and UNILAG, other universities across Nigeria have gradually expanded their Mandarin offerings, reflecting growing student demand and institutional interest. Confucius Institutes and Chinese language departments at the tertiary level provide structured curricula, trained instructors, textbooks, and access to scholarships and exchange programmes with Chinese universities. Programs now operate in locations such as the University of Ilesa, Nile University (Abuja), Yaba College of Technology (Lagos), Kaduna State University, Federal Polytechnic Oko, and the Nigerian Institute of Chinese Language and Culture (NICLC, Abuja), as well as the Chinese Language Institute in Port Harcourt; University of Ilesa; University of Port Harcourt; and University on the Niger. These initiatives have contributed to the steady growth, academic legitimacy, and institutionalization of Mandarin studies within Nigerian higher education.

Education Policy Context

The current status of Mandarin Chinese in Nigeria must be understood within the broader context of national language policy and globalization. Nigeria’s language policy traditionally prioritizes indigenous languages alongside English, but recent curriculum reforms indicate a pragmatic shift toward multilingualism that incorporates strategically important foreign languages. The inclusion of Mandarin in national curricula and examinations signals a recalibration of educational priorities in response to global economic transformations and Nigeria–China relations (NERDC, 2025; FME, 2025).

However, policy implementation remains inconsistent. While curriculum documents and examination frameworks exist, effective delivery is hindered by shortages of locally trained Mandarin teachers, dependence on expatriate instructors, and uneven institutional capacity (NERDC, 2025; Pulse Nigeria, 2025). These challenges highlight the gap between policy intent and classroom reality, underscoring the need for sustained investment in teacher training, curriculum localization, and institutional support to ensure the long-term sustainability of Mandarin education in Nigeria.

FUTURE: FATE OF CHINESE LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Challenges

The future trajectory of Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria is shaped by a number of structural and institutional challenges. One of the most persistent obstacles is the shortage of qualified indigenous Mandarin instructors. Although Confucius Institutes have supplied expatriate teachers, the overreliance on visiting Chinese instructors raises concerns about continuity, curriculum localization, and long-term sustainability (Lo & Pan, 2016; Odinye 2014, 2015, 2016). Without deliberate investment in training Nigerian teachers and scholars, Mandarin education risks remaining externally driven rather than locally grounded.

Inadequate funding and infrastructure also pose significant constraints. Many institutions lack well-equipped language laboratories, up-to-date instructional materials, and stable funding for program expansion. These limitations are particularly evident in public schools and emerging tertiary institutions attempting to introduce Mandarin courses. Furthermore, disparities in policy implementation across states and institutions have resulted in uneven access and quality, reflecting broader challenges within Nigeria's education sector (Bamgbose, 2011; FME, 2020).

Another challenge relates to curriculum relevance. While standardized teaching materials supplied through Confucius Institutes ensure uniformity, they often require adaptation to Nigeria's sociolinguistic and cultural context. Failure to localize content may reduce learner engagement and limit the integration of Mandarin studies into Nigeria's academic traditions and research priorities (Odinye, 2014).

Criticisms

Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria has also attracted critical scrutiny. A prominent critique concerns the role of Confucius Institutes as instruments of China's soft power and cultural diplomacy. Scholars have argued that these institutes may prioritize the projection of favorable narratives about China while limiting academic autonomy or critical engagement with sensitive issues (Yang, 2010; Paradise, 2009). In this view, Mandarin education is not merely pedagogical but also political, embedded within broader geopolitical strategies.

Another line of criticism focuses on language policy balance. Critics caution that the growing emphasis on foreign languages such as Mandarin could further marginalize Nigeria's indigenous languages, many of which already face declining intergenerational transmission. Given Nigeria's rich linguistic diversity, scholars argue that foreign language promotion should not come at the expense of indigenous language development and preservation (Adegbija, 2004; Bamgbose, 2011). These debates underscore the need for a balanced and inclusive language policy that accommodates global engagement while safeguarding local linguistic heritage.

Predictions and Prospects

Despite these challenges and criticisms, the long-term prospects for Mandarin Chinese in Nigeria remain largely positive. As China–Nigeria relations continue to deepen in trade, infrastructure development, technology transfer, and diplomacy, demand for Mandarin proficiency is expected to grow steadily. The recent inclusion of Mandarin Chinese in national curricula and its approval as an examinable subject in senior secondary school examinations indicate that the language has moved beyond a peripheral status to become an emerging strategic foreign language within Nigeria's education system (NERDC, 2025; Pulse Nigeria, 2025; Lagos Echo News, 2025).

Future sustainability will, however, depend on deliberate localization strategies. These include expanding scholarship schemes for Nigerians to study Mandarin and Chinese linguistics at advanced levels, strengthening postgraduate research in Chinese studies within Nigerian universities, and encouraging the production of locally authored textbooks and scholarly publications. Increased research output by Nigerian scholars—following the pioneering example of Odinye—will be critical in establishing Mandarin studies as an autonomous and intellectually grounded field in Nigeria (Odinye, 2016).

In sum, the fate of Mandarin Chinese in Nigeria will be determined by the balance between external support and internal capacity building. If current initiatives are complemented by strong local ownership, policy coherence, and academic research, Mandarin Chinese is likely to become a permanent and influential component of Nigeria's multilingual education landscape.

CONCLUSION

Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria has undergone a remarkable transformation, evolving from informal, trade-based interactions into a structured and increasingly institutionalized field of study. The earliest exposure to Chinese language in Nigeria, driven largely by commercial necessity and personal curiosity, laid the groundwork for later formal programs. This transition was catalyzed by the establishment of Confucius Institutes and the pioneering efforts of indigenous scholars, most notably Professor Ifeanyi Sunny Odinye, whose contributions in

curriculum design, pedagogy, and research provided a local intellectual foundation for the sustainable growth of Chinese language studies (Odinye, 2015; 2016).

Institutions such as Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, and the University of Lagos have been instrumental in expanding access to Mandarin education, setting standards for teaching, and fostering academic collaborations with Chinese universities. Beyond these flagship centers, Mandarin Chinese has gradually penetrated other regions, reaching secondary schools, private institutions, and additional universities, signaling the nationalization of Chinese language education. The recent inclusion of Mandarin in Nigeria's senior secondary school curriculum and national examinations further demonstrates its growing legitimacy as a foreign language of strategic importance (NERDC, 2025; Pulse Nigeria, 2025; Lagos Echo News, 2025).

Despite these advances, the future of Mandarin Chinese education in Nigeria is contingent upon addressing persistent challenges. Key issues include shortages of qualified local instructors, limited infrastructure, uneven policy implementation, and the overreliance on expatriate support. Furthermore, critics have raised concerns regarding the potential prioritization of foreign languages over indigenous Nigerian languages and the influence of Confucius Institutes as instruments of Chinese soft power (Odinye, 2016; Abubakar, 2018; Lo & Pan, 2016; Yang, 2010). Addressing these challenges will require deliberate investments in teacher training, curriculum localization, and research capacity, as well as policies that balance global engagement with the preservation of Nigeria's linguistic heritage.

Looking forward, the prospects for Mandarin Chinese in Nigeria remain promising. As China–Nigeria relations continue to expand across economic, diplomatic, and educational domains, demand for Mandarin proficiency is expected to increase. The continued development of indigenous teaching capacity, locally generated research, and policy alignment with global and domestic priorities will be crucial in ensuring that Chinese language education not only persists but flourishes as a vital component of Nigeria's multilingual educational landscape. In this context, Mandarin Chinese stands to play an increasingly significant role in preparing Nigerian students to engage with a globalized world, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and enhancing national capacity in international commerce and diplomacy.

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