THE COMPULSORY STUDY OF MANDARIN BY AFRICAN STUDENTS AT CHINESE UNIVERSITIES: A SOFT POWER TOOL?

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Abstract

The 2019/2021 Afrobarometer survey data show that only two percent of Africans view Mandarin as a desirable international language for young people to learn. This indicates that Beijing's attempts to enhance its cultural soft power in Africa through language promotion have had limited success. This project aims to further explore this finding by examining the perspectives of the compulsory study of Mandarin among African student migrants who have studied or are currently studying in China. We employed a descriptive survey design with quantitative data collected through questionnaires from a sample of 315 former and present African students in China. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected, including frequencies, percentages, standard deviations, and means. Contrary to the Afrobarometer survey results, African students in China greatly value learning Mandarin. The majority believe that proficiency in Mandarin makes them valuable members of society. They also desire Mandarin to be taught more widely in their home countries and view China as an attractive destination due to their Mandarin language skills. These results suggest that while the general African public may not be attracted to Mandarin, African migrant students with direct experience in China have a more positive perception of the language and its benefits. This highlights the need for future studies on Chinese soft power in Africa, as the perspectives of specific subgroups may differ from broader public opinion.

Keywords

Mandarin, African students, China, Soft power

1. Introduction

In recent times, China has evolved into a global powerhouse in various spheres, including education, culture, media, economy, agriculture, and technology (Chow 2015, 93-115; Cai 2010, 234-240; Yu 2009, 1-4; Song, Zhou and Hurst 2019, 1-8; Vörös 2022, 4-5). This evolution has triggered a surge in trading activities and an increasing demand for Chinese education among international students seeking enrollment in Chinese academic institutions. Additionally, the Chinese economy has progressively emerged as an attractive destination for African students. Consequently, there has been a noticeable increase in African students pursuing education at Chinese universities and other educational establishments (Tarrósy 2020, 28-29). Many of these Chinese universities, in line with the Chinese government's internationalization strategy, mandate Mandarin language studies for international students, including those from Africa. In the early stages of their study, almost all international students are required to learn Mandarin. In June 2017, the Chinese Ministry responsible for education published new rules that made the study of Mandarin compulsory for international students. While some people argue that these Chinese institutions have made learning Mandarin for foreign students mandatory to promote cross-cultural exchange and improve communication, others are of the view that this may be part of Beijing's cultural soft power strategy in a global landscape.

As the global competition for influence grows more intense, Beijing utilizes soft power as a strategic tool to shape African perceptions and ideas. Through significant investments in manufacturing, technology, and infrastructure in various African countries, Beijing goes beyond physical development to promote Chinese culture and language. By prioritizing the promotion of the Chinese language, Beijing aims to strengthen cultural ties and expand its influence in the region. This effort includes substantial investments in establishing Confucius Institutes (CI) and Confucius Classrooms (CC) as part of its comprehensive soft power strategy (Hefele, Merkle & Zhivkov 2015, 56-72). As of 2023, China had established "773 CC and 498 CI in 160 different countries" (China Daily, 2023). According to a report by the Africa-China Centre for Policy and Advisory (ACCPA), Africa hosts 48 Confucius Classrooms (CC) and 61 Confucius Institutes (CI).

China's objective is to enhance understanding of its culture and values through Mandarin education, aiming to bolster commercial and diplomatic relationships. Nonetheless, concerns arise regarding Beijing's potential 'colonization' through its language-focused soft power endeavors in Africa. These concerns may impact China's culture-driven soft power strategy in Africa, as A'Zami (2015) discussed in relation to neocolonialism and Beijing's influence consolidation on the continent.

As the global competition for influence grows more intense, Beijing utilizes soft power as a strategic tool to shape African perceptions and ideas.

Although there is a wealth of literature on African student migrants studying Mandarin in Chinese higher education, there is still a lack of research concerning the personal perspectives of these individuals. Therefore, we aim to focus on this demographic to explore their motivations and the subtler influences at play. This empirical paradigm seeks to answer our four research questions:

1. How do African student migrants value Mandarin education in their academic institutions?
2. What is the correlation between perceived societal value and Mandarin proficiency among African student migrants?
3. How is the teaching of Mandarin perceived in the home country context?
4. What impact does learning the Chinese language have on the attractiveness of China for individuals?

A total of 315 former and current African student migrants from Suzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, and Nanjing were randomly selected for participation in a descriptive survey to gather data on the mandatory Mandarin language curriculum within their institutions.

This study builds upon existing research that has contributed to understanding African student educational mobility in China and its impact on Chinese soft power initiatives. Some pieces based on fieldwork explore how China's "African policy" has facilitated the movement of Africans – primarily students, traders, and entrepreneurs – to cities like Guangzhou, which is known as a hub for African business (Tarrósy 2020, 20-36). Kenneth King looks at how China uses education and training programs as key tools in its soft power strategy in Africa. He argues that China leverages educational and training opportunities to build goodwill and strengthen ties with African nations. Scholarships for African students to study in China, as well as training programs for African professionals, are central to this strategy (King 2013). In "Africans in China: The Experiences from Education and Training," Adams Bodomo, through his fieldwork, explores the experiences of African students and professionals who have traveled to China for education and training programs. He examines the broader context of China-Africa relations through the lens of African migrants pursuing educational opportunities. He argues that African students are offered scholarships and opportunities to study in Chinese universities as part of China's efforts to promote its soft power and build goodwill and influence (Bodomo 2014).

2. The Soft Power of Mandarin: A Literature Review

The conceptualization of Chinese soft power among African student migrants in China has been scarce, and expanding the relevant knowledge corpus requires immediate scholarly attention. Therefore, this research project seeks to highlight this demographic's perceptions.

According to the 2019/2021 Afrobarometer survey, only two percent of Africans consider Mandarin an important language to learn. Therefore, scholars must inves-

tigate whether this perspective aligns with the beliefs of the African population in China.

Soft power has consistently been portrayed as a non-coercive and persuasive force in International Relations. The concept introduced by Joseph Nye refers to the non-coercive methods through which a country can influence others. Instead of using force or coercion, this approach relies on attraction and persuasion to win over others. Nye avers that "soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" (Nye 2004, 5). Nye asserts that there are three things that give rise to soft power: cultural enticement, attractive political doctrines, and appealing foreign policies and actions.

Amitai Etzioni explores the distinction between different types of power and highlights that "power differs according to the means employed to make the subject comply. These means may be physical, material, or symbolic" (Etzioni 1975, 6). This includes three categories of power: coercive, remunerative, and normative. This latest category "relies on the capacity to motivate through the force of ideas and win compliance through creating group norms with which individuals wish to identify" (Lampton 2008, 10). David Lampton broadens Etzioni's concept into "ideational power," which, as he underlines, "includes leadership, human intellectual resources, innovation, and culture […], which is broader than soft power" (ibid).

Other notable scholars have written extensively on soft power to support Nye's core idea. These scholars conceptualized power as the ability to control immaterial and ethereal things like information, culture, perception, opinion, and ideology (Foucault 1980; Gramsci 1971; Butler 1997). Gramsci argues that a country's power is not solely based on tangible resources such as military strength or economic wealth but also on intangible resources like culture and language. He suggests that cultural and linguistic hegemony plays a crucial role in maintaining and exerting power. Countries use cultural and linguistic dominance to shape subordinate classes' values, beliefs, and identities, thereby maintaining their control over society. By controlling the cultural and linguistic sphere, the ruling class can shape the worldview and consciousness of the masses, making them more compliant and less likely to challenge the existing power structures.

Language serves a pivotal role as a soft power instrument in International Relations, as emphasized by Kurlantzick (2007) and Wang (2007). Given its inseparable linkage with culture, language holds the power to mold perceptions, foster connections, and wield influence. A nation can amplify its soft power dynamics by advocating for its language as a universal means of communication (Li 2008). Specifically concerning Mandarin, its endorsement as a crucial foreign language for study forms a fundamental aspect of Beijing's comprehensive soft power approach, as highlighted by Gil (2008) and Yang (2015). Numerous scholars focused on the Africa-China relationship are increasingly exploring the impact of CIs on Chinese soft power initiatives. The establishment of CIs has facilitated broader access to Chinese language education and bolstered Chinese soft power by facilitating cross-cultural exchanges. In examining the global implications of CIs on Chinese soft

power strategy, Kenneth King offers valuable insights toward a nuanced comprehension of the significance of their existence: "[…] the CIs are currently light years away from the impact of McDonald's or Hollywood blockbusters […] They have altogether a more modest ambition than global competition for influence with the West. That would be wishful thinking. Their goal is to encourage hundreds of thousands of people to see a China that is different from how it is often presented in the West" (King 2013, 178). It is clear that perceptions significantly influence our ability to win the hearts and minds of others. This aspect should not be underestimated.

Blanchard and Lu (2012) offer a contrasting perspective on the role of language as a soft power tool. Their critique highlights the need to consider multiple soft power variables beyond language in the soft power discourse. They caution against solely focusing on the increase in Chinese language learners without a comparative analysis of other languages like Arabic, French, and Spanish. They caution Chinese soft power scholars and learners that drawing any conclusion on increasing one of the Chinese soft power variables, such as language, without a corresponding measure of other states or actors may result in skewed interpretations. Therefore, "while a dramatic percentage increase in the number of individuals studying Chinese has taken place, this fact may not be important if an even greater percentage increase has taken place in the number of individuals studying Arabic, French and Spanish" (Blanchard and Lu 2012, 570 citing Ding and Saunders 2006).

3. Mandarin as a soft power tool: the Case of the Afrobarometer Survey of 2019/20
China's growing presence in Africa has recently become increasingly complex and multi-faceted. While economic investment and infrastructure projects often dominate discussions, the concept of soft power has also come into focus. This research project's understanding of soft power is based on the Nyeian sense, i.e., a nation's ability to influence others through cultural values, political ideals, and attractive
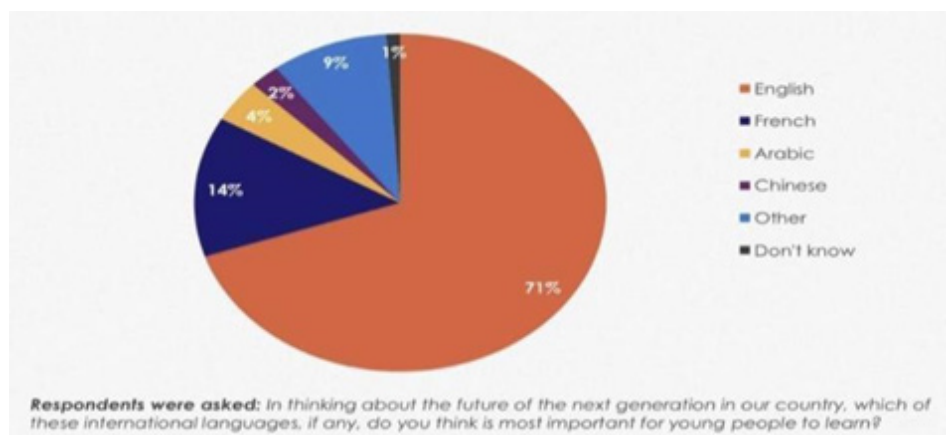

Respondents were asked: In thinking about the future of the next generation in our country, which of these international languages, if any, do you think is most important for young people to learn?

Figure 1. A pie chart showing the best international language for children to learn.
Source: Afrobarometer survey 2019/2020.

policies. However, the 2019/20 Afrobarometer survey revealed that a mere two percent of Africans view the Chinese language as desirable for children to learn, emphasizing the limitations of China's soft power in Africa. The survey rehashes the notion that China's soft power in Africa is not based on cultural attraction, particularly language. This revelation calls for research addressing the gap in the literature by examining perceptions of the importance of the Chinese language among African communities residing in China.

4. Why do African Students in China present an interesting case population to study?
The scholarly discourse on China–Africa relations in the 21st century has shown a notable increase in research output. This trend can be traced back to the historical foundations established during the era of Mao Zedong (Sarpong & Duho, 2022). The ongoing interaction between China and Africa is characterized by continual social, economic, and geopolitical shifts (Alden 2011). Notably, China's comprehensive Africa policy, exemplified by the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) convened in 2000, has facilitated and intensified China's involvement with the African continent (Tarrósy 2020, 22). These persistent transformations underscore the African community as an intriguing subject of study.

Within China, the African student migrant community represents the second-largest demographic after the African business community. This demographic is a tangible symbol of the deepening engagements between Beijing and Africa. In 1956, there were only 4 African students in China, but by 2018, nearly 81,000 African students were studying and living in the country (China Daily, 2023).

This demographic shift highlights the burgeoning African student community, offering a valuable vantage point to explore China–Africa interactions from diverse African and Chinese standpoints through their integration and interactions within the local context.

The African student migrant community in China is a unique population that offers an opportunity to rethink the conversation around China–Africa relations. By exploring the perceptions, experiences, and perspectives of Africans living outside their home continent, we can gain insights into their cultural, economic, social, and diplomatic engagements and interactions. It is crucial to understand how the experiences and perceptions of Africans living in China shape their relations. This knowledge can aid in filling any research gaps that may exist in the scholarly works on China–Africa relations.

5. The Case of African Students in China: Suzhou, Shanghai, Ningbo, and Nanjing
Suzhou, Shanghai, Beijing, and Nanjing remain home to some of China's top universities, as well as a large number of African students. African students studying in these cities can access world-class facilities, expert faculty, and cutting-edge research opportunities. A comprehensive study for African students in these Chinese cities provides an important reference for the achievements and success of the Chinese language as a soft power 'element' among Africans outside the African continent.

6. Methodology

The study used a descriptive research survey design between January and April 2023. The study population was comprised of former and current international students from universities in China. The participants of the study were selected randomly, irrespective of their programs of study or gender.

Primary data was collected from a sampling size of 315 African students who have studied or are presently studying in China. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 305 students for the study.

7. Ethical Considerations

This research project adhered strictly to the generally accepted research ethics and guidelines. The interview process was guided by the principles of approval, full disclosure, voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality.

Respondents were notified of the aims and goals of the research before seeking their participation. Also, disclosures relating to any interests in the project were disclosed. The authors of the research were fully disclosed to safeguard the integrity and credibility of the research and its findings. Confidentiality is a crucial agreement between the researcher and the respondent. According to Anderson (1998), researchers must fulfill ethical requirements regarding confidentiality by refraining from disclosing the information provided by respondents and other participants to third parties without obtaining their consent. The information gathered from respondents and research participants is treated with the utmost trust and confidentiality.

Participants were informed that their involvement in the project was voluntary. The project organizers allowed sufficient time for respondents to read and understand the requirements of the information being sought. They were also allowed to ask questions and seek clarification on any ambiguous issues. Furthermore, research participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without needing to provide an explanation. If they chose to withdraw, it would not incur any costs or negatively affect the relationship between the researchers and the participants.

Respondents were given a consent form indicating their willingness to partake in the project. They were free to withdraw at any time during the data collection process, even after giving their consent. They were not required to give an explanation for their withdrawal, and had no liability for their withdrawal.

8. Demographic information

Demographic information is essential in surveys as it offers valuable insights into the characteristics and backgrounds of respondents. This information is crucial for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the target population. The research project focused on African students from diverse backgrounds, considering factors such as nationality, age, gender, length of stay in China, and level of education.

Most respondents were between the ages of 25 and 29 (representing 48.70%). One respondent was above the age of 40. This demographic information provides relevant insight into how perspectives and experiences vary across different age groups.
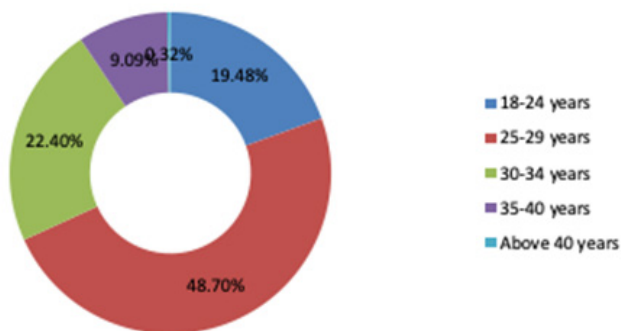

Figure 2. Demographic information: age

The nationalities of each respondent were grouped according to their region in Africa: North, East, West, and South. There were no respondents from Central Africa.
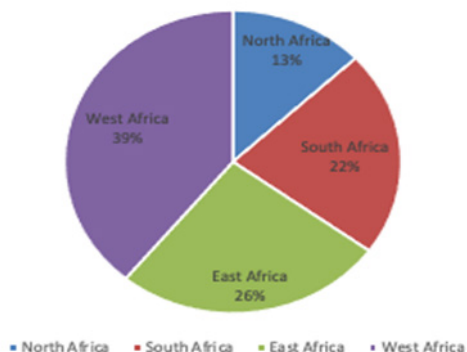

Figure 3. Demographic information: nationality

Information about gender in the survey offered valuable information on how the different genders perceive Chinese soft power. Gender can influence preferences, attitudes, and behaviors. Close to two-thirds of respondents were males, and the remaining were female.
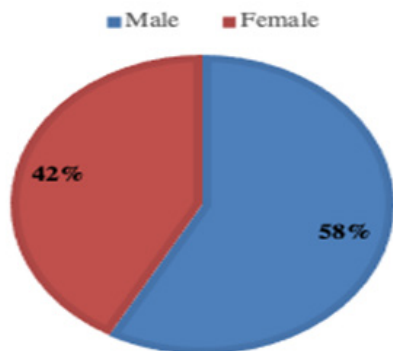

Figure 4. Demographic information: gender

The survey population consisted of both current and former African students in China. The majority of participants, representing 63.8% of the total, were African students currently studying in the country.
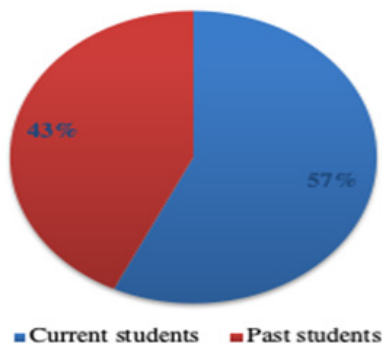

Figure 5. Demographic information: student status

The question "How long have you been studying/studied in China?" was posed to the respondents to find out their duration of stay in China. Information on duration of stay can be relevant in surveys that focus on migration or specific regions. It can provide insights into the experiences and perspectives of individuals who have lived in a particular area for different lengths of time.
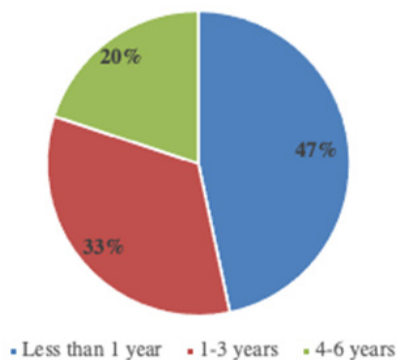

Figure 6. Demographic Information: duration of stay

The level of education of respondents in this survey is an important demographic characteristic that provided insights into perspectives and opinions. This research highlights the education level of respondents for several reasons. First, knowing the education level of respondents allows for the analysis of data based on different educational backgrounds, which can help identify any patterns or trends that may exist. It allows for the analysis of data based on different educational backgrounds, which can help identify any patterns or trends that may exist. It also provides a basis to examine how the opinions of respondents are influenced by their academic qualifications, which can impact their responses to survey questions.
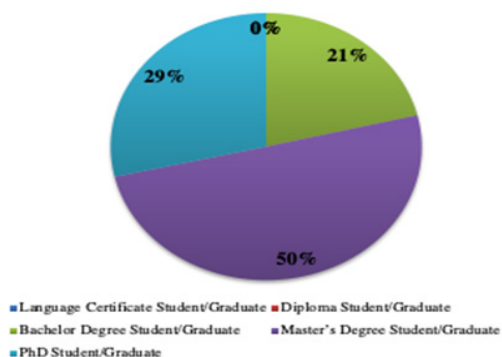

Figure 7. Demographic Information: educational qualification

In terms of investigating the socio-economic dimensions of the African students, questions about whether the each of them were beneficiaries of Chinese scholarship (including but not limited to a Government, Provincial or University scholarship) and if so whether the scholarships are partial or fully funded. It is important to mention that the type of scholarship may affect the overall experience.
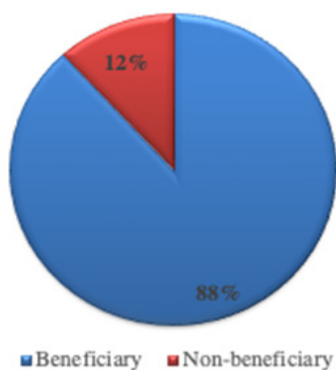

Figure 8. Authors' own construct: Demographic information (scholarship beneficiary)

Fully funded scholarships typically cover tuition, accommodation, and living expenses, allowing students to focus on their studies. Partial scholarships, however, may leave students struggling to cover the remaining costs, which could affect their academic and mandarin learning performance and motivation. The overwhelming majority were on beneficiaries of fully funded scholarships.
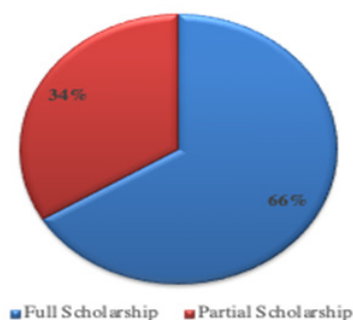

Figure 9. Authors' own construct: Demographic information (nature of scholarship)

9. Presentation of Results

Questionnaire	Mean Score*	Standard Deviation	Frequency
To what extent do you appreciate the *learning of Mandarin in your school as an international student?*	4.25	0.57	315
To what extent do you think that your Mandarin proficiency makes you an ideal person in society?	4.26	0.79	315
How do you value the teaching of Mandarin *in your home country?*	4.29	0.80	315
To what extent does learning the Chinese *language makes China attractive to you?*	4.36	0.79	315

Table 1. Authors' construct. Source: Field data, 2023.

Mean ranges: Very Low Rating (1.0-1.9), Low Rating (2.0-2.9), High Rating (3.0-3.9), Very High Rating (4.0-4.9).

Research Question 1: To what extent do you appreciate the learning of Mandarin in your school as an international student? This survey question aims to determine how the study of Mandarin influences respondents' perceptions and attractions toward China. The data indicates that respondents greatly appreciate learning the Chinese language at their institutions (mean=4.25, SD=0.57). This suggests that international students value the opportunity to study Mandarin, as it enhances their learning experience. The findings indicate that the study of Mandarin among African students reflects a positive reception of Chinese language and culture. This can be interpreted as a form of soft power, demonstrating that China's cultural influence extends to African students in China who choose to learn Mandarin.

Research Question 2: *To what extent do you think that your Mandarin proficiency makes you an ideal person in society?* The result gives evidence that respondents have the view that their level of Mandarin proficiency contributes highly to the ideal persons they become in society (mean=4.26, SD=.79). This indicates that most African students believe their proficiency in Mandarin positively influences their personalities within society. This perception suggests that being proficient in Mandarin is considered valuable and beneficial. When examining Chinese soft power, this finding implies that Mandarin proficiency significantly enhances China's cultural influence and appeal. It indicates that effective communication in Mandarin can help foster positive perceptions of China and its culture.

Research Question 3: *How do you value the teaching of the Chinese language in your home country?* The result shows that the respondents highly value the teaching of the Chinese language in their home countries (mean=4.29, SD=.08). When analyzing this survey result in the context of Chinese soft power, this result con-

cludes that the teaching of the Chinese language in respondents' native countries can contribute to enhancing China's cultural influence and soft power. It suggests that there is a recognition of the importance of Chinese language education and a desire to engage with Chinese culture, which is an indication that there is a positive perception and interest in learning Chinese among the respondents.

Research Question 4: To what extent does learning the Chinese language make China attractive to you? The results revealed that learning the Chinese language significantly enhances China's attractiveness to international students (mean = 4.37, SD = .79). This indicates that proficiency in the Chinese language positively influences China's soft power among African students and that the ability to speak Chinese is perceived as a valuable skill, contributing to a favorable perception of China. To analyze Chinese soft power in this context, it is important to explore the reasons behind this positive response. Are the respondents interested in Chinese culture, business opportunities, or other aspects of China? Understanding the motivations behind their interest can help identify specific areas where China's soft power can be further enhanced.

10. Challenges

The data collection process encountered various challenges, notably in reaching participants due to the geographical dispersion of African students across multiple provinces and institutions in China. To mitigate this challenge, we utilized WeChat, a predominant social media and messaging platform in the country, to effectively disseminate the survey. This approach facilitated access to our target demographic but also introduced certain limitations along the process. For instance, we faced challenges in ensuring the comprehensive completion of the questionnaire, as some respondents raised concerns regarding privacy and data security on the platform. Additionally, the online survey format hindered follow-up with participants who began but did not finalize their responses.

Moreover, the potential for sampling bias emerged from our reliance on WeChat, which may have primarily reached students who were more digitally engaged and held favorable views of Mandarin learning. This reliance could skew the results, as those less connected to Chinese digital platforms or with less favorable experiences may have been underrepresented in the sample. To mitigate these challenges, we undertook concerted efforts to engage diverse student groups and promote broad participation across various regions and institutions in China.

Despite these challenges, our collected data yielded valuable insights into African students' perceptions of compulsory Mandarin learning in China. Nonetheless, these limitations highlight the necessity for future research to utilize a broader array of data collection methods. Such an approach would enhance representativeness and facilitate a more comprehensive exploration of the complexities surrounding African students' experiences in China.

11. Conclusion

This study reveals a striking contrast between the general African public's limited enthusiasm for Mandarin, as indicated by the 2019/2021 Afrobarometer survey, and the overwhelmingly positive perceptions held by African student migrants who are studying/studied in China. Our findings indicate that for these students, Mandarin transcends the status of a foreign language, emerging as a vital asset fundamentally connected to their professional and social aspirations. The data underscores the instrumental value attributed to Mandarin proficiency by African students, who perceive it as a crucial vehicle for enhanced career opportunities and social mobility within China and their home countries. This contrast between African students' views and the broader sentiments of the African public suggests that direct experience in China significantly transforms perceptions of Mandarin and its practical utility.

Our findings are in line with Xu et al. (2023, 524), highlighting African students' perception of Chinese "linguistic capital" as beneficial for employability and social prestige. Tarrósy (2020, 29-30) further highlights the widespread belief among these students that Chinese is a vital global language with significant instrumental value.

Since our survey was conducted, recent developments in 2024/25 have shown continued growth in African students pursuing education in China, even amidst global uncertainties. According to Pie News, the anticipated launch of the Plan for China-Africa Cooperation on Talent Development in late 2024 is expected to stimulate an increase in the enrollment of African students in Chinese universities and colleges. This initiative aims to enhance educational ties by implementing various programs and strategies. China's Belt and Road Initiative has deepened ties with several African countries, with educational exchange remaining a key pillar of this relationship. Mandarin language learning has become increasingly prominent in Africa, with several countries introducing it into school curricula as part of broader economic cooperation agreements. This signals a shift toward greater acceptance of Mandarin as a strategic language for international engagement, even if it has not yet translated into widespread enthusiasm among the general African public. These trends suggest that the role of Mandarin in shaping China-Africa relations will continue to evolve, with a growing number of African students leveraging their language skills for career advancement.

Given the limited sample size and scope of our research, there is a clear need for more expansive studies that examine a wider range of African student experiences in China and explore how these individuals' perceptions evolve post-graduation. Larger-scale research could provide more definitive insights into how Mandarin proficiency affects their long-term career trajectories and social standing upon returning to Africa. Additionally, future research should focus on comparative studies between African student migrants and other international student groups in China to gauge the broader implications of language learning within China's global soft power strategy. ✸

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