



## Is the Chinese Cultural Policy in Africa a Threat to the Teaching and Learning of the Spanish Language in Nigeria?

Endong, Floribert Patrick Calvin , Essoh, Ndobu Eugenie Grace

**Abstract**—The growing influence of China (as an emergent power) in the world is having serious cultural and linguistic repercussions in many African countries. Indeed, besides contributing enormously to the selling and “exportation” of the Chinese language and culture, this influence is tremendously attracting the attention of many potential learners from African countries to want to acquire the Mandarin. Accordingly, the Mandarin is progressively viewed as “the tongue of the future” and its learning is considered a strategic venture susceptible to lead to attractive academic and professional opportunities in future. Africans’ relatively favorable attitude towards the Mandarin is partly owing to a subtle, fruitful and very visible Chinese socio-economic and cultural cooperation in most African countries, notably Nigeria. This cooperation – which has solid linguistic and cultural components – is, in effect a series of multifaceted investments or initiatives partly aimed at stabilizing the teaching and learning of the Mandarin in African countries. This paper attempts to show how the more or less predictable expansion of Chinese language in Nigeria may be a threat to the learning – and consequently the survival – of not just local indigenous languages, but equally minor modern European languages such as Spanish. Based on semi-structured interviews with experts and secondary data, the paper explores the linguistic and cultural components of the Chinese cooperation in Nigeria and compares them to those of other European countries such as France and Spain.

**Keywords**—Spanish Language, Mandarin, Chinese Cooperation, European Modern Languages

### I. INTRODUCTION: CHINA’S PRESENCE IN AFRICA

Owing to spectacular economic and political reforms and favorable repositioning in world politics, China’s growing influence is today spreading in many parts of the globe including Africa. As an emerging power, her influence is felt in world trade, world politics, international communication and many other cardinal domains. In most African countries, this Chinese presence is very much felt not just through

palpable Chinese small/medium scale initiatives, circulation of Chinese products and culture, execution of infrastructural development projects and the like. As Utomi insightfully contends, China’s dramatic growth and striking modernization, coupled with attendant industrial, energy and market expansion needs, have successfully brought her into contact with most Third world countries including Africa [1, pp.39]. A vibrant Sino cooperation is presently evidencing China’s attention to Africa and her growing influence in the continent. Such an influence has caught the attention of critics, scholars, political economists and the like. As Kerr for instance remarks, some of the dividends of this influence are already very perceptible in the domains of media/cultural production and consumption. He notes that:

Although at present South and East Asian [including the Chinese] new media producers tend to restrict themselves to media hardware or to creating media programs that have been “deodorized”, [...] it is likely that, soon South and East Asian programming may start to replace Western imports into Africa. [...] It is a matter of debate to decide whether South and East Asian media influences on Africa constitute a new form of neo-colonialism or an inevitable step in the de-colonization of media at a global level. [2, pp.18]

It goes without saying that China is prominent among these East Asian countries. Its apparent democratization of prices of consumer products in the various African markets and its purportedly active partnership in the development of most African countries earned it relatively pro-Chinese sentiments from most Africans. In effect, many Africans have veritably embraced Chinese culture. Such Africans now view the mandarin as an attractive linguistic code to acquire. Ezeafulukwe corroborates this view when she succinctly contends that:

*Les Africains s’abandonnent aux cultures qui s’infiltrèrent partout (la culture occidentale et aujourd’hui la culture asiatique). De nos jours, nous constatons un grand effort par le gouvernement Chinois pour se vendre au monde. Les Chinois s’implantent maintenant partout et ils trouvent une terre fertile en Afrique où existent des gens toujours prêts à s’abandonner à toute nouveauté.* [3, pp.62]

Africans are fond of embracing whatever cultures, irrespective of their origins (western cultures and now Asian

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cultures). Today, we can see tremendous efforts by the Chinese government to sell China to the world. Chinese people now settle everywhere. They find a fertile ground in Africa where people are always ready to embrace any new thing. [Our translation]

Indeed, the Chinese government's efforts are seen in the systematic socio-cultural and economic cooperation it contracts with most African countries. This cooperation often has cultural and linguistic components and is somehow fruitful as it partially accounts for African's positive attitude toward the Chinese culture and language [4-8]. In Nigeria, the Chinese cooperation is multifaceted. This cooperation clearly indicates or translates China's desire to facilitate the expansion of its language in the African continent. At first sight, learning the Mandarin may be a new, odd and exotic habit to some Nigerians and as a result of this perception, initial attitudes towards the mandarin may not be very much positive. However, China's accentuated presence and growing influence in the international scene (in world trade and politics especially) may be a motivating factor for the learning of the mandarin and with this, the mandarin's spectacular expansion in Nigeria may be more or less foreseeable –just as it presently observed in some other African countries such as Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya and the like [4, 6]. This paper seeks to show how such an expansion may be a threat to less dominant European languages in Nigeria such as Spanish. The paper explores the major lines of the Sino cooperation in Nigeria stressing particularly on its cultural and linguistic components. The paper equally analyses Nigerians attitudes towards this culture and language (the Mandarin). It also compares China's cultural cooperation to that of Spain and Spanish speaking countries in Nigeria in view of showing how the apparent inexistence of exchanges in cultural affairs between Spain and Nigeria is detrimental to the expansion of its language in the country.

## II. CHINESE CULTURE AND LINGUISTIC COOPERATION IN NIGERIA

The objectives of China's presence and involvement in Nigeria can be inferred from the overall motivations of its policy in Africa. These motivations are expressed in her publication titled "*The White Book*" which stipulates China's African policy. *The White Book* claims that China's policy in Africa is principally driven by the desire to establish and develop "a new type of strategic partnership" with countries of the continent, a partnership "characterized by equality and mutual confidence in political affairs, mutually beneficial cooperation in the economic realm and the strengthening of exchanges in cultural affairs" [7]. This provision unarguably points to the existence of a strong cultural component in China's cooperation in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Her cooperation in the cultural realm is manifested by sustained efforts to push her language in Nigeria. Indeed, as Gazibo and Mbatia succinctly put it, "the Chinese know that a country's political and cultural influence is also

transmitted through language" [6]. The promotion of the Mandarin is therefore a key aspect of China's involvement in Nigeria. Such a linguistic project is very much manifested by the creation of linguistic centers,, Confucius Institutes, the publication of print media in Mandarin language and the allocation of stipends/scholarships to study in China [5-6, 8-10].

To foster cultural exchanges and enable the expansion of the Chinese language in Nigeria, the Chinese government has created two operational Confucius Institutes in Nigeria: one in Nnandi Azikiwe University and the other in Lagos. The activities of these centers consist in administering Chinese proficiency examinations, organizing language and cultural exchanges, translation services and providing information for students wishing to study in China [10]. King further notes that these institutes work in symbiosis with the specific universities in which they are created and indigenize their educational programs to fit the Nigerian context. They therefore serve as reliable tools for the systematic promotion of the Mandarin language. In his words,

The CI's [Confucius Institutes] don't promote a common syllabus; they are strongly encouraged to relate what they do to the context of that university and that country [the university and country in which they are created]. So, some have been responsible for introducing Mandarin out to surrounding primary and secondary schools. But one of the key messages is that it may be possible to visit China for more intensive language study. So, good keen students [...] can find themselves exposed to Mandarin in China, for a few weeks, months or even for a degree. We should underline perhaps that the CI "movement" despite being in the response mode, must surely be the largest and most rapidly expanded project the world has ever seen. [5]

In addition to these two Confucius Institutes, the Chinese government has set up a Chinese language Centre in Abuja for the teaching of Mandarin as a second language to students of all ages and levels of education. The Chinese government equally offers scholarships to many Nigerians to study in China and this is another catalyst of the expansion of the Mandarin in Nigeria. Ifeoma and Ifeanyi note that these scholarship programs have been serving a double and complementary linguistic objective: facilitate the expansion of the mandarin on one hand and use the mandarin as an antithetical and antagonistic force to the western languages and cultures in the world as a whole [8, pp.113]. They opine that:

China has exerted its strength and love for Chinese Confucian cultural values by resisting Western languages from replacing the Mandarin. Till today, mandarin is used in every day conversation as well as the written form of the Chinese language, and is spreading over the world. The Chinese government has also given many scholarships to foreigners in ensuring that Mandarin spreads to all countries

of the world and this is great challenge to the western languages. [8, pp.113]

China intensified human and cultural interaction with Nigerians through the scholarship programs it supports and the Confucius Institutes established in Nigeria is visibly yielding considerable fruits. Through her CIs, she officially promotes cultural interaction between Chinese and Nigerians and enables the expansion of the Mandarin, thereby contributing to the growth of the People's Republic of China's cultural influence and seductive power in Nigeria [4, 6-7]. Another vector of the expansion of the Chinese language in Nigeria is the West Africa United Business Weekly, a paper published in the Chinese language and circulated in the West African sub-region by the China Lagos Industrial and Commercial Federation. This organization has the mandate to help Chinese businesses navigate legal, social and security matters and encourage a climate favorable for the further expansion of Chinese businesses. In one way or the other, the West Africa United Business Weekly plays a cardinal role in making Mandarin more present in Nigeria in particular and the West African sub-region in general.

### III. NIGERIANS' ATTITUDES TOWARD THE CHINESE CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

It has often been argued by a number of scholars and critics (foreign language protagonists) that Nigerians generally have a negative attitude towards foreign languages. They most often view these foreign languages as serious threats to the learning and survival of indigenous languages and so rarely show full interest in them. Few exhibit circumstantial interest in foreign languages when competence in one of them is urgently needed as eligibility pre-requisite for admission into an academic or professional program as well as to successfully do a business trip in a foreign country [11-15]. However, attitude toward Chinese may slightly differ [2-3, 8].

It is presently difficult to give exact statistics on Nigerians' attendance of linguistic and cultural programs offered by the Confucius Institutes and Chinese linguistic centers. Nevertheless, a tremendous receptivity by Nigerian towards Chinese culture and language is undeniable. It is easily perceptible that a considerable number of Nigerians (from government officials and policy makers to lay men) share a pro-Chinese sentiment and praise the Confucian cultural values to a considerable extent. In tandem with this observation, Olugboyega notes that the Mandarin is one of the special foreign languages "Nigerians currently have their eyes on, and it might be one of the country's new mother tongues in the future. And one thing explains this new love for Mandarin – the economic prosperity of China" [11]. To buttress his fact and show the extent to which the Nigerians favorably receive both the Mandarin and the Chinese culture, Olugboyega quotes a government official (Babatunde Fashola – Governor of Lagos) as passionately contending that "whether we admit it or not, the Chinese are taking over the

global economy and we are only preparing our pupils for the opportunities that the use of Chinese language as the possible language of the future might provide" [11].

Like many other Africans, Nigerians are conscious of the growing influence of China in the world and view such a growing influence as warranting the acquisition of linguistic competence in Mandarin. According to Gazibo and Mbambia, a plethora of factors are responsible for Africans' interest in China [6, pp.24]. Some of these factors – particularly influencing students' sentiments – include the recognized improvement of the training received by Nigerians in China, the possibility of obtaining study stipends, the low cost of education and life in China and finally the ever-increasing international standing of the People's Republic of China.

The growing influence of China in the world influences many Nigerians to see the Mandarin as the language of the future, a language that will open them multiple doors and lead them better professional and academic opportunities. This attitude observed among Nigerians is very much in line with Robert's Gardner's social psychological approach in foreign language didactics which associates students' motivation to learn a foreign language to the social dispositions they have toward the speech community in question. Dorney draws inspirations from this theory when he notes that: "learning the language of another community simply cannot be separated from the learners' social dispositions towards the speech community in question. [...] Students' attitudes towards the specific language group are bound to influence how successful they will be in incorporating aspects of the language" [16, pp.112]. The fact that many Nigerians have positive attitudes towards Chinese involvement and culture in Nigeria, is an indicator of greater chances for the Mandarin to grow in Nigeria.

However, there exists a school of thought among Nigerians (namely the mother tongue-protagonists) which views the teaching and progressive expansion of the Mandarin as a threat to indigenous (Nigerian) languages. This school of thought regards the introduction of the Mandarin in Nigerian school curriculums and the recent "relegation" of the three dominant Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) to the status of "optional subjects" in the Senior Secondary School as factors militating for non-promotion and ultimate death of Nigeria's indigenous languages. Olugboyega endorses the mother tongue protagonist movement recommending that instead of principally ensuring the stabilisation of Mandarin teaching in Nigeria, the Chinese cooperation should also support the promotion of indigenous Nigerian language. He passionately opines that:

No doubt, our institutions have accepted Mandarin; nonetheless, I enjoin China and her language community to take a cue from the Occident by investing in the development of the Nigerian languages, and Nigerian language industry. The contributions of the Occident are quite many and

enormous, but for reference, a few will do [...]To the Nigerian government and its institutions, our partnership with China on the study of Mandarin and the spread of the language is a noble one. Novelty demands that we make this relationship mutual – following the Occident example. The development and investment of China in the Nigerian language sector should not be compromised. It remains a demand! [...] I take a stand not to allow my mother tongue go into extinction. [11]

#### IV. IS THE MANDARIN LANGUAGE A THREAT TO MINOR EUROPEAN LANGUAGES?

The Mandarin may not be a serious threat to well established languages such as French which has since been recognized and elevated to the status of first foreign language and second official language [17-18]; and whose expansion is sustained by a very active French cooperation [14, 19-21]. Many Nigerians have understood the necessity to acquire French for a smooth integration with their francophone neighbors in the ECOWAS sub-region and so are likely to give the French language priority over the Mandarin. On the other hand, the Mandarin is likely going to be a threat to less dominant European languages such as Spanish and German whose expansion is still at its gestation stage [13, 22]. The Spanish language is perhaps the one to suffer the most as for the moment, it is virtually unknown to the majority of Nigerian laymen [22-23]. Due to economic recession in Europe, the Spanish cultural and linguistic cooperation in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular has ceased to be vibrant. Spain has close most of its cultural centres in Africa meanwhile one hardly feels the cultural cooperation of other Spanish speaking countries in Nigeria. Spain has retracted most if not all her readers (from most African universities) and has stopped the various scholarship programs often accorded to students to go and study. All these used to be instruments of the introduction and expansion of the Spanish language in African countries [24-26].

In Nigeria specifically, Spanish cultural cooperation is not really felt and though the Spanish language is part of the foreign languages whose teaching is encouraged at university level in Nigeria, there is still much to be done to let the language enjoy the status the Mandarin has secured in such a very brief period of time. Apart from few initiatives for the teaching of the Spanish language in the diplomatic missions of some Spanish speaking countries such as Equatorial Guinea, few and relatively rare linguistic centers and special private language institutions, the teaching of Spanish does not enjoy multiple vector of its stabilization in Nigeria as the Mandarin. Therefore, because of China's is accentuating her presence in Nigeria, the Mandarin is today, virtually more "visible" than the Spanish language and with the growing influence of China in Nigeria, there is no doubt that, in a relatively short term, the Mandarin will have, a better expansion than the Spanish language.

#### V. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the growing influence of China (as an emergent power) in the world is having serious cultural and linguistic repercussions in many African countries. Indeed, besides contributing enormously to the selling of the Chinese language and culture, this influence is tremendously attracting the attention of many potential learners from African countries to want to acquire the mandarin. Accordingly, the mandarin is progressively viewed as "the tongue of the future" and its learning is considered a strategic venture susceptible to lead to attractive academic and professional opportunities in future. Africans' relatively favorable attitude towards the mandarin is partly owing to a subtle, fruitful and very visible Chinese socio-economic cooperation in most African countries, notably Nigeria. This cooperation which has linguistic and cultural components, is, in effect a series of multifaceted investments/initiatives aimed at pushing the mandarin in African countries. This paper attempts to show how the more or less predictable expansion of Chinese language in Nigeria may be a threat to the learning (survival) of not just local indigenous languages, but equally minor modern European languages such as the Spanish language. Based on semi-structured interviews with experts and secondary data, the paper explores the linguistic and cultural components of the Chinese cooperation in Nigeria and compares them to those of other European countries such as France and Spain.

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