



Mapping Connections

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**Before and beyond the Confucius Institute: An
Epistemological Turn to Understanding China's
Soft Power in MENA**

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Before and beyond the Confucius Institute:

An Epistemological Turn to Understanding China's Soft Power in MENA

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Abstract

The Western international relations concept “soft power” has deeply penetrated official, academic, and public vocabulary of China’s presence in the MENA region in this century. The Confucius Institute (CI) has become the *Leitmotif* of scholarship on China’s soft power in cultural domain. However, the region has also witnessed the emergence of a range of non-CI language or cultural-cum-language training spaces. This working paper argues that a study of local non-CI sites and agents of Mandarin teaching and learning provides a vantage point through which to understand how China’s cultural soft power generates, shapes, and works from below. This allows us to better understand how China’s soft power is socially constructed and produced through, and in, interactions between local individuals and various social relations, rather than a “power” (or, force) simply being imposed from outside in a top-down fashion. In this fashion, we take “an epistemological turn” for a more solid analysis of China’s soft power.

Keywords: Mandarin teaching and learning; soft power from below; Lebanon; Tunisia; Egypt.

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Introduction

The Confucius Institute (CI) is a Chinese government-funded non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting Chinese culture and Mandarin teaching and learning (MTL) around the world.¹ As of September 2020, sixteen years since the establishment of the first CI (in Seoul in November 2004),² a total of 541 CIs and 1,170 Confucius Classrooms had been opened in 162 countries and regions (Yang 2020, p. 146).³ Most of these were set up in collaboration with local educational institutes. Equally impressive are the various CI activities, and programs designed towards different ends. To name a few, they include hosting Chinese exhibitions and troupes to enrich locals' cultural life, organising Chinese Bridge—Chinese proficiency competition held annually for foreign students,⁴ financially supporting PhD-level research in and on China through Confucius China Studies Program,⁵ and occasionally offering free language courses to local employees of Chinese state-owned companies in the host countries.

Given the full support from the Chinese government in terms of finance, personnel, outreach, and teaching materials, and the authoritative and reputation of the CI brand for MTL, in discussing China's cultural soft power, the CI has long been a subject of intense scholarly focus.⁶ Soft power, as Joseph Nye defines, is “the ability to get others to want the outcomes that you want” (2004, p. 5), and more particularly “the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion” (ibid., x). Scholars regard the CI as one of China's main soft power instruments, channels, and mechanisms (see, e.g., Repnikova 2022, Paradise 2009, Yellinek *et al.* 2020, Chai 2021, Hubbert 2019, Liu 2019), which is particularly true of the MENA case. Unlike its experiences in western societies and some African countries, the CI has been warmly welcome by the host Arab countries.

The MENA region has also witnessed the emergence of a range of *non*-CI language or cultural-cum-language training spaces.⁷ In stark contrast to the prominence of the CI in the literature on Chinese soft power and cultural diplomacy, there seems to be an absence of academic attention to these non-CI spaces. According to my observations, the organisation of non-CI

¹ This paper treats Mandarin teaching and learning in the broadest sense. Mandarin learning is unnecessarily for the purpose of obtaining a certificate or degree.

² The CI in Seoul is officially recognised as the first of its kind. In fact, al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Kazakhstan) and Lanzhou University (China) co-founded a Mandarin learning centre in April 2003; the Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies (Uzbekistan) and Lanzhou University co-founded the CI in June 2004.

³ Specifically, 135 CIs and 115 Confucius Classrooms are in 39 Asian countries; 61 CIs and 48 Confucius Classrooms in 46 African countries; 187 CIs and 346 Confucius Classrooms in 43 European countries; 138 CIs and 560 Confucius Classrooms in 27 American countries; and 20 CIs and 101 Confucius Classrooms in seven Oceania countries. (Yang 2020, p. 146)

⁴ 汉语桥

⁵ 孔子新汉学计划

⁶ As I tried in April 2023, a simple Google Scholar search on “soft power,” “China,” and “Chinese language” yielded 8,510 results, of which 3,370 involve the CI. Replace the keyword “soft power” with “cultural diplomacy,” 1,100 out of 2,050 results coming out involve the CI.

⁷ Due to limited space, university and school courses or programs in Mandarin are not considered in this paper.

MTL activities can be clustered into at least eight types: 1) Institutions and programs sponsored, jointly run, or supported by the People's Republic of China (PRC);⁸ 2) Institutions and programs founded and operated by Taiwan;⁹ 3) Private Mandarin learning centres opened by Chinese sojourners of PRC nationals;¹⁰ 4) Private Mandarin courses as one of the services offered by Chinese business service agents operated by sojourners of PRC nationals;¹¹ 5) Local private Mandarin learning centres;¹² 6) Local private training or foreign language learning centres which incorporate Mandarin, among several other languages, into their offer of service;¹³ 7) Sites functioning temporarily to accommodate local (ir)regular gatherings for MTL; and 8) Online activities, in which MTL is organised by locals through social media.¹⁴ Concrete details on these spaces are lacking in current scholarship. Nevertheless, the (co-)existence of these types indicates a MTL organisational landscape of an expansive scale in which the CI is only one of many sites and agents.

My project aims to present a deeper examination of local non-CI spaces (i.e., the above-mentioned types 5 to 8). The aim is not simply to fill an empirical gap in scholarship on MTL in MENA. Rather, it is to address two problems with the dominant framework of understanding China's soft power solely through the CI: 1) The scope of the context contained; and 2) The subjective dimensions of soft power unexamined. My argument is that an examination of non-CI MTL spaces can open up new ways of understanding how China's interaction with MENA is shaping the relationship between these two geographies. I argue that a study of local non-CI MTL sites and agents provides a vantage point through which to understand how China's cultural soft power generates, shapes, and works *from below*. This allows us to better understand how China's soft power is socially constructed and produced through, and in, interactions between local individuals and various social relations, rather than a "power" (or, force) simply being imposed from outside in a top-down fashion. In this fashion, we take "an epistemological turn" for a more solid analysis of China's soft power.

⁸ Such as the Saudi Hikma College for Mandarin Chinese (沙特智慧宫中文学院) established in Riyadh in January 2023.

⁹ Institutions and programs founded and operated by Taiwan are treated here as an independent category, rather than being subsumed to the first category. This is only because they are arrangements of people and systems *in* Taiwan, having nothing to do with mainland China financially and administratively. Taiwan promotes MTL in Jordan through the Chinese Language Centre. It offers Ministry of Education Huayu Enrichment Scholarship (HES, 华语文奖学金) to Jordanian nationals to learn Mandarin in Taiwan. Taipei-based Taiwan Mandarin Educational Resources Center (台湾华语教育资源中心) is the umbrella organisation. For a comparative understanding of the Confucius Institute and its Taiwanese counterpart, see "Economic impacts of Confucius Institutes and Taiwan Education Centers on Taiwan" by Donald Lien, Peilan Tang, and Andrew Keithley.

¹⁰ Such as Kamal Shan Language Training Center in Cairo.

¹¹ Such as China House for Business Service (中家) in Luxor.

¹² Such as the Nagya Chinese Center (مركز ناجيه لتعليم اللغة الصينية) in Cairo.

¹³ Such as the Smart Business & Consulting in Tunis.

¹⁴ The Egyptian named Waleed publicises the information of Mandarin courses he offers through his Facebook page "埃及龙老师" (Egyptian teacher Long). The courses can be in person (in Dokki, Nasr City, or Maadi according to the registered students' preferences) or over Zoom.

Non-CI sites and agents are not monolithic—they differ country by country in terms of organisational form, quantity, (dis)connection(s) to the CI, life cycle, and rationale for establishment. Their multiplicity reminds us that MTL, like religious practices, is “translocalisable” and “pluralistic” (Chau 2021, p. 27). Each site attracts different Mandarin learners. (Some students go to more than one place.) Mandarin achieves its meanings and values in the establishment of not only the above-mentioned MTL sites and agents of various types, but also through the complex of supply-demand relations which manifests in local Mandarin students’ preferences in terms of places, instructors, pedagogy, institutes, and programs. As such, to examine China’s cultural soft power from below, this project asks about initiators, organisers, learners, motivations, teaching materials, curricula, pedagogies, and marketing strategies. This project also asks about the intra-relations of the non-CIs, relations of the non-CI agents to the CI, how the participants’ perceptions of China developed in those non-CI places, and how the non-CIs influenced the ways in which the participants perceive Mandarin, Chinese culture, and more beyond it.

Primary sources for this project were collected through several channels and methods including: 1) Fieldwork in Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates; 2) Participant observation of Arab students and businessmen communities in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Wuhan; 3) Digital ethnography of online language learning communities, and Facebook group pages; and 4) Semi-structured interviews. While a longer article will scrutinise a specific case study, this working paper focuses on introducing the empirical and theoretical grounds of this project. Specifically, in what follows, I will first present an actor-centred bird’s eye view of the non-CI organisational landscape of MTL in MENA which has emerged and evolved in this century. I then turn to a literature review-style examination of the limitations of focusing on the CI as the principal site of analysing China’s soft power, thereby discussing what an account of other sites of MTL might reveal.

Non-CI MTL in MENA

What motivates Mandarin learning in MENA?

Before turning to a look at some of the main characteristics of the organisation of Mandarin teaching in MENA, it is important to explore the factors motivating Arab populations to wish to undertake the learning of this language. Obviously, there are a range of reasons at play here, and it is difficult to generalise from country to country. However, certain insights can be reached from an examination of Internet-based Mandarin learning, which has been available for over two decades and before the opening up of the first CI in MENA (in Lebanon in November 2006). Mylanguageexchange.com, as the URL itself indicates, is one such language exchange community to improve second language. Since it was launched in October 2000, over three million members from over 175 countries have used it. Looking for a language exchange partner/tutor, and learners through posting/advertising on this online platform are two main purposes for visitors to register as a member. Several key observations emerge from a numerical reading of MENA netizens’ posts of self-introduction on this website. (Tables 1 and 2)

Year Country	2004	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	Total
Algeria	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1
Bahrain	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	2	1	--	3	5	--	--	2	--	--	--	--	13
Egypt	--	1	--	--	1	--	5	2	2	1	7	7	2	3	4	2	1	1	1	40
Iraq	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	2	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	3
Jordan	--	--	1	--	--	1	--	2	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	4
Kuwait	--	1	1	1	--	--	6	5	3	4	--	1	--	--	1	--	--	--	--	23
Lebanon	--	--	1	--	--	--	3	8	8	8	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	29
Morocco	--	--	--	--	--	1	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	2
Oman	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	2
Qatar	--	--	--	1	--	1	--	2	1	2	4	1	3	1	--	--	--	--	--	16
Saudi	1	--	2	2	3	7	14	16	10	8	7	6	3	1	1	3	--	--	--	84
Syria	1	--	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	2
Sudan	1	--	--	--	1	--	--	1	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	4
Tunisia	--	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1
UAE	5	7	16	26	26	53	48	37	50	24	6	1	3	--	--	--	--	--	--	302

Table 1: Number of MENA-based registered members for Mandarin learning

Source: Mylanguageexchange.com, data were collected on 13 April 2023.

Motivation Country	Intermarriage	Doing business and career promotion	Learning foreign language as a hobby	Upbringing	Heritage language	Relocation	Total number of the members who posted their motivations for Mandarin learning
Algeria	1	--	--	--	--	--	1
Bahrain	--	5	2	3	--	--	10
Egypt	1	19	8	4	--	--	32
Iraq	--	--	--	--	--	--	0
Jordan	--	3	--	1	--	--	4
Kuwait	--	14	--	6	--	--	20
Lebanon	1	12	--	4	--	--	17
Morocco	--	--	--	--	--	--	0
Oman	--	2	--	--	--	--	2
Qatar	1	4	4	5	--	--	14
Saudi	--	34	10	5	--	--	49
Syria	--	1	--	--	--	--	1
Sudan	--	4	--	--	--	--	4
Tunisia	--	--	--	1	--	--	1
UAE	6	115	12	33	7	13	186

Table 2: Motivations of the MENA-based registered members for Mandarin learning

Source: Mylanguageexchange.com, data were collected on 13 April 2023.

By the time of writing this working paper, a total of 11,941 members had been registered on this website as learners of Mandarin.¹⁵ Among them, 525 are from MENA.¹⁶ The distribution of this population in terms of specific country and year of registration (2004 to 2022) is as Table 1 shows. Registrations from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) alone (302 in total) outnumber those from all the other Arab countries as a whole. Cosmopolitan UAE hosts the plurality of ethnicities, cultures, and religions (Mermier 2021). Unsurprisingly then, of the 302 “UAE” members, the vast majority are not locals, but migrants and expats from other Arab and non-Arab countries and regions.¹⁷ Motivations of their Mandarin learning, in the order of percentage from the large to the small, include upbringing, relocation in Sinophone countries, hobby, heritage language, and inter-cultural mutual understanding in intermarriage. On top of all these is trading Chinese commodities (through the Internet, in person in the UAE, or visiting China and placing an order) and career promotion.

The UAE case does not parallel the wider demand for Mandarin learning in MENA. The latter seems less diverse in terms of motivation. Trading is the predominant reason, followed by boosting career, upbringing, hobby, and intermarriage. The absence of heritage language and relocation on the list can be explained by the fact that overseas Chinese whose first language is not Mandarin have not constituted a collective of large size in demographic flow to, and presence in, most of the MENA countries (see, e.g., Wang 2015).

As to MENA-based Mandarin teachers registered on this online platform, they are extremely few in number: fourteen in total, of whom eleven are Chinese-native speakers,¹⁸ and two are locals holding a university degree in Mandarin language.¹⁹ Moreover, their membership registration, compared to that of the MENA-based Mandarin learners, is relatively recent—all after 2013 (the year when the Belt and Road Initiative was launched).²⁰ Considering these, the third-party online community and platform for second language learning seem either unpopular among, or overlooked by, MENA-based Mandarin teachers. (This inference echoes my observation of *apprentus.com*, an online community marketplace founded in 2014 to look for teachers/tutors, and language courses including for Mandarin learning.) Then, what about the organisation and operation of physical non-CI sites *on the ground*? Do they employ the Internet

¹⁵ <https://bit.ly/3KTaduG>. Of course, we need to take care with these interpretations based on raw statistics. Those that use *MyLanguageExchange.com* need to already be aware of this website, comfortable with using this (kind of) cyberspace medium for language learning; able to (at least) browse English-language webpages; and comfortable with required personal information publicised online. Therefore, the data cannot necessarily be assumed as being representative of the situation of the country and the region.

¹⁶ By from MENA, I mean they lived in the region at the time of registering on the website, regardless of his/her (original) nationality and places of permanent residence.

¹⁷ Such as India, Pakistan, Thailand, Philippine, Europe, and Americas.

¹⁸ They were based in Kuwait (1 person), Saudi Arabia (1), Morocco (2), UAE (1), Lebanon (2), and Qatar (4). (<https://bit.ly/3GOvLHp>, <https://bit.ly/41Ez1NE>, <https://bit.ly/40gR4sk>, <https://bit.ly/3ol3nGA>, <https://bit.ly/3UKVCG2>, <https://bit.ly/3GZM84j>) At least five of them are from mainland China. No members are from Algeria, Sudan, Syria, and Tunisia. Data on Libya, Palestine, Yemen, Djibouti, and Comoros do not exist.

¹⁹ One is Jordanian registered in 2020, a professional Arab teacher who has teaching experience in the University of Jordan (<https://bit.ly/43LHpgq>), and another Lebanese (<https://bit.ly/43JStKZ>)

²⁰ Kuwait (2020), Saudi (2023), Morocco (2019 and 2023), UAE (2016 and 2019), Lebanon (2013, 2014, and 2020), Qatar (three in 2016, one in 2021).

for MTL? If so, how? I shall now sketch the stories of Egypt, Lebanon, and Tunisia, respectively, to unpack the multiplicity of non-CI actors and their efforts to organise MTL.

Multiplicity of non-CI actors in Egypt, Lebanon, and Tunisia

1. Egypt

With more than fifteen universities having established a chair of Chinese language and literature, Egypt has the largest group of graduates in MENA each year with a university degree in Mandarin. On the other hand, Sino-Egyptian contacts involve a wide range of sectors,²¹ thereby creating a substantial number of job opportunities (mainly in tourism,²² construction and engineering, and sales) for local Mandarin speakers. These two realities not only constitute the backdrop against which at least a handful of local Mandarin learning agents emerged as early as 2013 (and in particular since 2018), but also account for several features these agents share.

First, both the founders and instructors are Egyptian university graduates of Chinese language. In some cases, the founder and the instructor are the same person. Second, they conveniently resort to social media (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram) to do marketing and self-promotion. The total number of their Facebook followers varies, between thousands to tens of thousands. To attract more social media followers (some of whom are potential Mandarin learners) and keep the follower engagement/stickiness, they regularly update their accounts with chunks of selected Chinese linguistic knowledge, popular Chinese aphorisms and expressions in specific occasions (with Arabic translation as the reference), or introductions to Chinese culture, either in texts or through short videos. Third, some founders/instructors do not have physical teaching points and offices. Their MTL organisation and activities rely completely on social media, since doing so does not require financial investment and operating permit. Online courses and (free of charge) study groups (the number of group members can be as large as hundreds) are organised through Telegram groups or WhatsApp groups. Fourth, both in-person and online courses are small in size (from one-to-one, several, to two dozen or so), and tailored to meet various needs of students. The most popular ones are the Chinese proficiency test (namely HSK) cram courses, and courses on tourist Mandarin.

2. Lebanon

Locals, graduates in Chinese language and literature, young entrepreneurs, online study groups, and social media, these are the keywords the narratives surrounding which weave the Egyptian story. In the Lebanese case, however, they are all absent. The Berlitz Language Center in Beirut

²¹ To name a few, they include translation, publication, gaming, education, construction, telecommunication, agriculture, tourism, and genomics.

²² Being a tourist guide is the most lucrative job for Egyptians who can speak Mandarin. The monthly salary for a contracted Chinese-Arabic-English interpreter of Egyptian nationality working for Chinese construction companies in Egypt is between 15,000 to 25,000 Egyptian pounds (in 2023), which is roughly equal to 485 to 809 USD. In contrast, the tips each tourist from mainland China has to pay for the local Arabic tourist guide is 5 USD per day. Local Arabic-Mandarin tourist guide does not take tourist group the total number of which is less than five.

seems to be the only language learning institute which has courses on Mandarin.²³ Of those Lebanese graduates in Mandarin I have talked to, no one showed excitement about the idea of opening a Mandarin learning centre, at least not in the short term. Yet, a local journalist, who films and produces short videos about Lebanese culture and society as a part-time job for a Chinese We Media, wished to establish a China culture center organising cultural activities including MTL if his connections and collaborations with his media peers in China could be further consolidated in the future.

In fact, Ying Zhao, a Chinese woman who married to a local in 2001 and settled down in Lebanon the same year, already established a China culture centre in 2013 named AiChinese Center.²⁴ Though beyond the purview of this working paper, her efforts to promote Mandarin among locals worth an overview here. It reveals a tendency of, and Chinese sojourners' advantage in, monopolising the market of Mandarin teaching in Lebanon, in which the jointly constructed cultural and social identity under intermarriage plays a crucial role.

Three years after moving to Beirut, Ying Zhao started teaching local adults Mandarin from scratch as a private tutor. In an interview with a Chinese media outlet, she explained that she “was confident of Mandarin teaching being a business opportunity.”²⁵ Her confidence derives from being in a position to have a head start in Sino-Lebanese related business. Over the past two decades, she actively participated in the activities of bilateral economic and cultural exchanges, in particular those introduced, organised, or supported by the Chinese embassy in Beirut. In promoting Mandarin, she played a key role in the establishment of the CI in Saint Joseph University in 2006 (which is the first of its kind in the Arab world),²⁶ and was in charge of it from 2006 to 2010.²⁷ With accumulated local connections and first-hand experience of MTL and dealing with both Lebanese and Chinese sides, Ying Zhao launched the Chinese Language Teaching & Learning Network in 2013.²⁸ Its operational blueprint evokes the CI. Based in Beirut, and with AiChinese Center being its “flag Chinese language classroom,”²⁹ the Network aspires to organise and standardise MTL in Lebanon and the Middle East through “providing instructors and lecturers to educational institutions and organizing cultural activities.”³⁰ The instructors are five young Chinese women who married to locals. Though failed to achieve its regional goal, it has proved to be successful within Lebanon. As its official website states, “The teaching network covers 6 cities (Beirut, Tripoli, Jbeil, Doha, Zahle and Saida), 5 universities, 3 schools and 10 continuing educational institutions.”³¹

²³ Other languages the Center teaches include English, French, Italian, Spanish, German, and Arabic.

²⁴ It literally means “Love Chinese Center” since “Ai,” as the Center’s website explains, refers to the Chinese character 爱, which means love. <https://aichinese.webs.com>

²⁵ <http://m.china-arab.com/particle/5420>

²⁶ <http://m.china-arab.com/particle/5420>

²⁷ <http://m.china-arab.com/particle/5420>

²⁸ <https://aichinese.webs.com/instructors>

²⁹ <https://aichinese.webs.com>

³⁰ <https://aichinese.webs.com>

³¹ <https://aichinese.webs.com>

Intermarriage enables Ying Zhao and her cohort to possess cultural and social capitals which both the locals and other Chinese migrant entrepreneurs could hardly have, become adept at cross-cultural communication, win trust relatively easily from the locals and the Chinese, and have acumen of identifying the potential Mandarin learners. These are the advantages with which Ying Zhao is capable of maintaining and expanding personal networks to secure her MTL business to be sustainable.

3. Tunisia

Non-CI MTL in Tunisia takes place mainly in two institutes: the Smart Business & Consulting, a language training centre in Tunis;³² and the Blue Bird Educational Centre in Sfax (the second most populous city in Tunisia),³³ which offers variegated extracurricular courses to pupils and young teenagers.³⁴ Mandarin courses in these two institutes differ first and foremost in terms of availability. The Sfax one can offer Mandarin courses only occasionally, depending on the availability of Mandarin instructors. Yet, the owner's perseverance and eagerness to set up the business of Mandarin teaching have been a constant. This sub section gives attention to his story, since it opens up a window into a local's agency and disadvantage in exploring this cultural business.

Though never been to China (and any Sinophone countries) nor learnt Mandarin,³⁵ Yousuf al Fahmi believes that his Blue Bird Educational Centre *should* offer Mandarin courses to children. Because Mandarin is the language of the future, i.e., doing business.³⁶ In 2015 and 2016, Sfax hosted a series of Chinese cultural activities arranged through the Sfax-based Confucius Classroom. This further confirmed to him his vision of Mandarin teaching among Tunisian young generations, in addition to other business opportunities to be brought about by being involved in Tunisia-China exchanges.

Al Fahmi was initially sanguine about his ambitious plan—to establish a China culture centre. He even already prepared a piece of land in Sfax for it. Without the cross-cultural capital and connections with any Chinese sides, he needed supportive partners who can make up for this weakness. The ideal one was two locals who have been the partners of the Confucius Classroom in Sfax since 2009. Al Fahmi approached them with the proposal of establishing a partnership, but was politely rejected. He is a late comer to this business, which occasioned a competition relationship between them. In fact, al Fahmi has his own advantages and resources, including a ready place (his centre) to host short-term or long-term visiting Mandarin teachers and cultural events at any time, well-established networks of clients to spread the words, and students curious about having fun experience of foreign cultures. These conditions enabled him to take an outflanking tactic to let children and young teenagers experience

³² The languages include English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Arabic, and Turkish. The instructor of Mandarin is a local graduate in Chinese language and literature.

³³ Name has been changed.

³⁴ Courses are such as computer, Spanish, French, English, handwork, chess game, cooking, and mathematics.

³⁵ Name has been changed to respect the privacy of the respondent.

³⁶ Interview was conducted in 2015.

Mandarin and Chinese culture. It was through contacting the Sfax branch of the AIESEC.³⁷ (Al Fahmi himself was a member of the Club.)

“Entirely youth-led” and with branches in over 126 countries and territories,³⁸ AIESEC is a global platform and NGO to “facilitate...international exchanges so that young people may experience and understand cultures other than their own.”³⁹ Established in 2002,⁴⁰ AIESEC’s China branch started facilitating volunteering and internship abroad in 2008.⁴¹ By 2023, the contacts to its counterparts in MENA have expanded to eleven Arab countries,⁴² of which Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco are the most popular destinations among Chinese applicants.⁴³ According to an AIESEC staff, it is usually the branch (AIESEC club) in the host city that takes the initiative to send the China branch an introduction of an internship/volunteering programme (product), and costs and fees to be charged. Then the China branch publicises the programme information among its members (university students registered as AIESEC members) for application. The programmes usually combine cultural immersion,⁴⁴ and involvement in the development of the local community.⁴⁵

For most Chinese AIESEC volunteers and interns, exploring and experiencing local/authentic/exotic culture is the main motivation for their participating in the AIESEC international volunteering and internship programmes (Nyiri 2019). Teaching basic Mandarin, which is subsumed under education in the AIESEC programme, is one of the conventional contents. For al Fahmi, the Sfax Club saved his money as remuneration for Mandarin teaching, and time and energy in looking for Mandarin instructors, and logistical matters including visa application, air ticket booking, and accommodation arrangement.

Problematizing the CI as the Site of Observing Soft Power

The growth of the globalisation project of the CI in MENA is one of the main aspects of China’s cultural diplomacy campaign. In contrast, the emergence and vitality of the non-CI agents and spaces, as just described, point to local grassroots quests for, and need and efforts of, MTL. Both types of organisations, together with non-CI agents founded by Chinese sojourners (which my project does not cover), constitute the complete organisational landscape of the

³⁷ AIESEC was originally a French acronym for *Association internationale des étudiants en sciences économiques et commerciales*. Its name in English is International Association of Students in Economics and Business. As Pal Nyiri points out, “the full name is no longer used since the association’s membership has extended beyond economics and business” (2019, p. 8).

³⁸ <https://www.aiesec.co.uk/about/>

³⁹ <https://www.aiesec.co.uk/about/>

⁴⁰ <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/CWTJaT1Jykus6W1ClgzPUw>

⁴¹ <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/CWTJaT1Jykus6W1ClgzPUw>

⁴² They are Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Tunisia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Algeria.

⁴³ Interview was conducted in December 2022 through WeChat.

⁴⁴ Programmes are such as “Drive Morocco to Better Culture Understanding” (<https://bit.ly/3KWzAff>), “Explore Egypt” (<https://www.jianshu.com/p/9edf8cab81c7>), and “Agadir dreaming beyond languages” (in Morocco, <https://bit.ly/3mJA4gF>).

⁴⁵ Such as interning in a cancer hospital in Tunisia (<https://bit.ly/41OAeLL>), and teaching children painting in refugee camps in Lebanon (<https://bit.ly/3MY4FS6>).

globalisation experiences of Mandarin in MENA. Obviously, the CI is not the only key actor in the whole picture, nor representative of the non-CIs. Therefore, the CI-centred narratives of MTL activities reveals only a partial story, a story that either falls into the Chinese state's "strategic narratives" (Miskimmon *et al.* 2012), or "strategic communication" (Anderson and Engstrom 2009, p. 32), having very little or nothing to say about the non-CI spaces that are unfolding in front of us.

The CI perspective also has its own limitations in observing and analysing the play of soft power. Because it is top-down, failing to reveal soft power's *subjective* dimensions, as the focus on the non-CIs would do. As Joseph Nye puts it, "Many power relationships.....*depend very much on what the target thinks*, and this is a crucial aspect of soft power" (2021, p. 197; emphasis added). This reminds us that in analysing whether and how Mandarin and Mandarin culture actually work to ripple through local people, the locals' perception cannot be ignored. The motivations of Mandarin learning among Arab populations in MENA and the organisational efforts of non-CI MTL in Egypt, Lebanon, and Tunisia, as I unpacked above, bring this view into sharp relief.

Local students, teachers, and promoters of Mandarin, and entrepreneurs of MTL business, exert agency by empowering social media, taking the initiative to approaching the Chinese side (the local Confucius Classroom), and solving the problem of lacking a Mandarin teacher through collaboration with international organisation AIESEC. They are the protagonists in structuring a series of objective social relations (e.g., between individuals, MTL agents, individuals and agents, and individuals and digital technology), as well as subjective interpretive relations (e.g., individuals' social status and their career planning, their assessment of the value of Mandarin in the job market and their learning centre choice).

Through the top-down CI lens, the effects of soft power are likely to be believed be proportional to its resource. As Nye remarks, "[Policymakers] frequently define power simply in terms of the resources that can produce outcomes. By definition of power as resources, a country is powerful if it has a relatively large population, territory, natural resources, economic strength, military force, and social stability" (2021, p. 197). This political logic explains that as a main vehicle and agent of China's cultural diplomacy (Hartig 2015, Gil 2009, Pan 2013), the CI's incomparability to any other non-CI MTL agents in terms of power resources (e.g., financial support, branding, teaching materials, authoritativeness, and reputation) is the manifestation and outcome of China's political behaviours and foreign policy. Therefore, the powerfulness of the CI's resources refers to the powerful state supports of promoting MTL, rather than to the influence and attractiveness of Mandarin (through the CI) to the local people.

Nye offers a solution to examine the effectiveness of the power resources: look at the "context" (2021, p. 198). He gave an example of American tanks, functioning well in desert warfare, but less well in Vietnamese swamps and jungles. In the case at issue here, the "context" is in a twofold sense. It can be synonymous with the local and host ecology which is structured through people's actions, interactions, and complex webs of social relations, in which, as abovementioned, local people's perception of Mandarin counts. However, through the CI lens,

the scope of this type of “context” is constrained within the CI-related, including those individuals who have direct contacts with, or participation in, it, but excluding or marginalising other groups.

The other type of “context” is historical conditions—they are “the bedrock of ideas” (Dabashi 2015, p. 6). The CI approach frames this context geographically between China and MENA *and* within the temporal span of the past fifteen years or so. However, contemporary Sino-Arab contacts are datable to 1956, not even to mention the narrative of bilateral relations stretching back to the Tang Dynasty. The locals’ perceptions of Chinese culture and Mandarin were influenced by specific legacies of historical moments, or events, as well as official and public discourses shaped in a specific era. In addition, the CI approach fails to capture how what happened in other geographies (e.g., Africa, the West) has contributed to the creation and shaping of local knowledge today about Mandarin and Mandarin culture. One example is a four-minute video, produced by Al Jazeera Plus (AJ+) in 2020, and titled “Why should we learn Mandarin? Is it difficult? You might think anew after this video.” To introduce the importance of Mandarin, the program “cited” three examples as evidence: Mark Zuckerberg speaking Mandarin in 2014 at Tsinghua University; the five-year-old Arabella Kushner, granddaughter of Donald Trump, reciting an excerpt from *Trimetric Classic* (one of the Chinese classic texts) in 2016; and Jim Rogers, American investor and financial commentator, emphasising the necessity of teaching children Mandarin (Al Jazeera Plus 2020).

The notion and theory of “Soft power” are usually discussed in Western context and in IR studies, applied to great powers” (Dadabaev, 2015),⁴⁶ and criticised as an imperialist practice. An examination of MTL in non-CI spaces directs our attention to the socially constructed dimension in understanding/unpacking soft power, thereby de-imperialising the framing and narrating of South-South relationship under Soft power. It complicates our understanding of soft power and the nature of China-MENA contacts today.

⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8m4c8j32Yc>

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