

## Reflections on Mandarin Teaching in the Brazilian Context

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*In recent years, Mandarin Chinese has gained visibility in Brazil, accompanied by the expansion of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms as key instruments of China's cultural diplomacy. This article offers a research-based reflection on Mandarin teaching in the Brazilian context. After outlining the historical processes of standardizing Putonghua and promoting Chinese internationally, the text presents two Brazilian institutional case. The analysis shows how global language-planning strategies are reinterpreted in local academic partnerships and classroom practices, highlighting both opportunities and tensions regarding cultural representation, linguistic diversity and the risk of exoticizing "Chinese culture."*

Keywords: *Mandarin Chinese, Confucius Institute, language policy, Brazil, Chinese as a foreign language*

### 1. Introduction

The teaching of Mandarin Chinese in Brazil has grown significantly over the last decades, especially since the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) in the country beginning in 2008. The partnership between Brazilian universities and Chinese educational institutions has made it possible to offer courses that encompass not only linguistic instruction, but also cultural experiences that help shape a deeper understanding of China as a contemporary society. Within this context, this article reflects on pedagogical practices developed at the Confucius Institute at the University of Brasília, aiming to analyze how cultural elements permeate language learning and how teachers can address cultural topics in a meaningful and critical manner.

The expansion of Mandarin language courses in Brazil has been noticeable since the beginning of the 21st century, a period during which diplomatic and especially commercial relations between Brazil and the People's Republic of China

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(PRC) were rapidly intensifying. At that time, the number of learners, as well as the availability of courses, teaching materials, and instructors, remained limited. Over the years, however, the scenario changed significantly. Interest in learning Mandarin has increased, motivated by cultural curiosity, professional aspirations, and the consolidation of economic cooperation between the two countries, but also as part of broader efforts by the PRC to internationalize its language and culture. As noted by Pinheiro-Machado (2013), prior to the early 2000s there was relatively little circulation of knowledge about China in Brazil; this began to change as official delegations and partnerships multiplied, triggering a media surge that frequently emphasized China's economic growth while often portraying the country through exoticized imagery.

The expansion of Mandarin courses in language schools and universities, alongside the establishment of Confucius Institutes — founded in 2004 and today present in 13 Brazilian institutions — reflects this new dynamic. My own experience reflects this trajectory: after studying in Beijing, where local culture was strongly highlighted in the classroom though with limited reference to China's linguistic plurality, I continued my studies upon returning to Brazil in 2009. Opportunities soon emerged for me to teach Mandarin as a foreign language, first privately and later in institutional programs, including Prolem at the Federal Fluminense University and the Confucius Classroom inaugurated there in 2019. Throughout these experiences, I observed how Brazilian learners often develop strong fascination for the language and for representations of China as culturally rich, economically powerful, or even "exotic." Yet, despite the growing number of teachers and resources, the multilingual reality of China — with more than 80 recognized language varieties — rarely appears in introductory courses, where "Chinese" is commonly, and simplistically, equated with Mandarin.

Understanding the role of culture in the language classroom requires overcoming simplified notions of "curiosities" or "exotic customs." The concept of culture itself is dynamic and has undergone multiple reformulations throughout history. Laraia (2002) highlights that culture is not a genetically inherited trait, but a system of meanings learned and shared within social groups. Kramsch (1998) adds that culture involves participation in a discursive community that shares space, history, and collective imagination. Likewise, Mendes (2015) emphasizes that what is taught in language classrooms is always a language-culture, meaning that linguistic forms and cultural practices are inseparable.

Mendes (2015, p. 207) notes that culture may be understood as the totality of characteristics that shape a social group's way of life, including values, beliefs, institutions, and traditions. However, it is essential to recognize that culture is not static; it transforms alongside social changes. Thus, teaching culture involves not

the transmission of a fixed set of customs, but the development of awareness about the fluid and negotiated nature of meanings that emerge from communication practices. Schlatter (2000) reminds us that cultural encounters produce both proximity and estrangement, which can be productive when learners are encouraged to reflect on their own cultural norms while discovering the other. Such reflexivity helps avoid stereotypes and promotes mutual understanding. On the other hand, Almeida Filho (2002) warns that cultural curiosity may result in exoticization when learners reduce the other culture to picturesque or eccentric features. Therefore, designing pedagogical materials and class activities requires critical attention to how cultural content is selected, contextualized, and discussed.

In the context of Mandarin language teaching in Brazil, this discussion becomes especially relevant due to historical fascinations and misunderstandings surrounding China. Travel accounts such as those of Ribeiro Barbosa in 1880, who described China with admiration and curiosity after a long sea journey (Lisboa, 2016), and the reflections of writer Lygia Fagundes Telles (1960), who questioned what remained of “ancient civilization,” reveal how cultural imaginaries about China have long been marked by fascination, distance, and myth. Contemporary teaching practices must therefore promote a more grounded and nuanced understanding of China, considering both its historical depth and its current sociocultural dynamics.

In this sense, the present text is configured as a research-reflection article, grounded in the author’s teaching experience and in bibliographic dialogue with scholars of language-culture education. Rather than presenting results in a traditional empirical format, the objective is to raise reflections on the context, especially regarding the increasing promotion of the Chinese Language.

This article examines the development and international promotion of the Chinese language within the broader framework of China’s contemporary language policies and soft-power strategies, with particular attention to the Brazilian context. After outlining the historical and political processes that shaped the standardization of Mandarin and the reform of the Chinese writing system, the study explores how these policies reverberate abroad through institutions dedicated to cultural diplomacy. The article then analyzes the presence, structure, and expansion of Confucius Institutes in Brazil, including two units in which the author has worked as a Chinese language instructor, drawing on institutional documents and professional experience. By combining a qualitative and documentary research approach, the paper investigates how linguistic planning, cultural initiatives, and educational partnerships contribute to shaping the public image of China in Brazil and to the growing demand for Chinese Language Education (ChLE). Ultimately, the study aims to offer critical reflections on the

intersections between language policy, international cooperation, and the promotion of Mandarin as a foreign language in Brazil.

### **1.1. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and documentary research approach. As Flick (2009) argues, qualitative research is particularly relevant when dealing with the “pluralization of life worlds” (p. 20), that is, when the researcher engages with socially diverse and dynamic contexts. Contemporary social change requires research to rely increasingly on inductive strategies, given that phenomena are multifaceted and shaped by complex sociocultural forces (Flick 2009, 21). For this reason, a qualitative perspective was selected in order to examine the promotion of Chinese language and culture in Brazil within its current and expanding sociopolitical context.

Considering the limited availability of consolidated data connecting Mandarin language teaching and language policy studies in Brazil, this research relies on a documentary foundation. After outlining a diachronic overview of language reforms in the PRC and the historical development of diplomatic relations between Brazil and China, the study examines institutional documents, policy statements, public reports, and academic literature. This approach facilitates the identification and interpretation of linguistic planning initiatives and mechanisms of soft power as instruments contributing to the construction of China’s public image in Brazil.

## **2. The Chinese Language and Its Historical Reforms**

Articles should be reasonably divided into sections and, if necessary, into subsections. Numbering should be in Arabic numerals and follow the decimal system. Please mark the hierarchy of subheadings as follows:

Discussions on strategic planning in China frequently evoke classical works such as *The Art of War*. Internationally influential, the book is often referenced in debates on strategy and political action and is widely cited as an inspiration for the Chinese government. In its opening chapter, Sun Tzu famously asserts:

“Only through numerous strategic calculations can we achieve victory. Without them, defeat is inevitable. How could one ever win without a strategic plan? By observing these conditions, we can foresee success or failure.” (Tzu 2021, 11, translated by Chih)

This strategic orientation also guided China's linguistic planning, which was deliberate and long-term. As early as the mid-20th century, despite the transformations that followed the May Fourth Movement, national illiteracy rates remained extremely high. When the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, approximately 80% of adults were illiterate (Ross 2005, 11). One widespread belief was that the "ideographic nature of Chinese characters" constituted "a major obstacle" to achieving universal literacy (Chu 2000, 221). Consequently, reforming the writing system became central to China's linguistic management, with a primary goal of eradicating illiteracy by establishing a more homogeneous logographic system.

Since the beginning of the century, the promotion of a national language has also been tied to modernization efforts and to strengthening a sense of national unity (Zhou and Ross 2004; Liu and Tao 2016). The need for a shared national language fulfilling the role of a lingua franca had already been recognized at the end of the 19th century (Guo 2015, 71). The designation of Mandarin as China's sole national language was consolidated in the mid-20th century, closely connected to governmental commitments to expand literacy (Chu 2000; Spolsky 2014).

Although the writing system underwent reforms, its core structure remained intact. Under Putonghua, characters continue to operate much as they did in ancient bone or bronze inscriptions—each one representing meaning and corresponding phonetically to a single syllable. Reform therefore aimed not to redesign the writing system, but to simplify it. Traditional characters remain in use in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. The logic of simplification consisted in reducing the number of strokes, as in the case of the character for "horse": the traditional 馬 (mǎ) contains ten strokes, while the simplified 马 (mǎ) contains only three. In 1965, a list of 2,298 simplified characters was officially introduced for standardized use in publications, reinforcing literacy initiatives and expanding the reach of state policies. Spolsky (2014) compares this approach to Lenin's contrasting strategy of allowing non-Russian languages to circulate as a way to promote socialism.

Simplification was only one component of China's linguistic management in the late 20th century. Other initiatives included: standardizing pronunciation through the creation of the pinyin romanization system; identifying and mapping regional varieties; documenting languages of officially recognized minority groups; regulating the translation of names and foreign terms; developing pedagogical resources; promoting language education; encouraging bilingualism; advancing foreign language instruction; and implementing proficiency testing (Spolsky 2014, 139).

Many challenges were inseparable from political and demographic realities: the size of the country, its ethnic and linguistic diversity, its governing structure,

and technological developments all shaped the trajectory of language-planning measures, which underwent continual reformulation (Spolsky 2014; 2021). As Spolsky notes:

“There is great variety in the language practices of the various ethnic and social groups, differences of ideology within and between groups, and resulting conflicts in management.” (Spolsky, 2014, p. 189)

Throughout the process of defining an official national language, numerous meetings were held involving linguists and government officials—eventually leading to the establishment of a State Council—to debate linguistic issues. These discussions culminated in the 1986 decision that Mandarin Chinese would be the language of instruction in all schools, the working language of governmental institutions, the standard for media, and the common language for communication among speakers of other varieties. Having a language with an educational function, as Cooper (1997) explains, is tied to the role of schooling as a primary instrument of social mobility and social control (Lagares 2018, 65). Spolsky (2021) notes that although schools are important agents in shaping linguistic repertoires, they cannot enact significant change without the coordinated support of other institutions. In China’s case, however, the top-down nature of national language policy meant that reforms extended beyond schooling to all media and state communication nationwide.

These policies have had consequences not only within China—where, as of 2024, Ethnologue estimates the existence of 281 non-official Chinese varieties—but also internationally. In the Brazilian context, most Mandarin learners encounter little information about China’s internal linguistic diversity, often leading to an impression of linguistic homogeneity. As Calvet (2007) notes, the idea that “all Chinese speak Chinese” is “singularly seductive,” yet scholars such as Liu and Tao (2016) complicate this myth by emphasizing China’s internal heterogeneity (p. 122).

Language policies promoting Putonghua have also been strongly connected to technological development and educational expansion, which helped disseminate simplified characters and consolidate the role of pinyin as a pedagogical tool. The spread of Putonghua has accelerated alongside China’s rapid urbanization and market-driven internal migration, as the language functions as the national lingua franca, is required for many professions—including teaching—and is preferred in job interviews and state institutions.

### **3. The Confucius Institute and the International Promotion of Chinese Language and Culture**

The principal Chinese institution responsible for the international dissemination of language and culture is the Confucius Institute (CI). Named after the philosopher Confucius, the Institute has strategically positioned itself around the world since 2004 through partnerships established with local schools or universities. Unlike other cultural institutes—such as the British Council or the Goethe-Institut—a Confucius Institute does not operate independently abroad: it can only be established through a formal partnership with a host higher-education institution.

This raises the question: is the CI merely another cultural and linguistic promotion institution, comparable to its Western counterparts? Ma (2018) argues that, unlike these older and better-established institutions, China entered the global educational market at a relative disadvantage. By partnering with foreign universities, the country effectively finances a platform from which it can present a national image aligned with its political interests and circulate positive official discourses about China (Ma 2018, 64). Other scholars suggest that China's cultural diplomacy is also linked to its pursuit of a "peaceful rise" and to efforts to counter persistent hostile perceptions associated with communism and with Chinese people more broadly (Wei 2017, 23).

Wang et al. (2023) stress that the construction of China's international image through Mandarin teaching involves presenting language and culture as a unified product. For these authors, international Chinese language education should be grounded in mutual learning, taking into account the educational, political, and cultural characteristics of each local context. Effective programs must therefore align with the realities and needs of the host country. This is the model that Confucius Institutes have sought to implement in Brazil.

The first Brazilian Confucius Institute was inaugurated in late 2008 at São Paulo State University (Unesp), in partnership with Hubei University, at a time when Brazil–China trade relations were rapidly strengthening. From its beginning, the Institute aimed not only to promote Chinese language, but also to function as a platform for cultural and academic integration (Paulino 2019, 176). It extended its activities across different cities and established agreements with both state and municipal education authorities to offer Mandarin classes in primary and secondary schools (TV Unesp 2014).

Despite its relatively recent creation, the institution representing China abroad has grown at an accelerated pace. As of 2022, the Confucius Institute network counted 492 institutes and 819 Confucius Classrooms operating in 162 countries and regions. In Brazil, there are currently 11 Confucius Institutes and one

Confucius Classroom. The speed of this expansion is unprecedented: within only two decades, the CI surpassed the oldest Western cultural institute, the Alliance Française, in geographic reach. While the CI had already established presence in over 160 regions, the Alliance Française operated in 137 countries as of 2021.

This growth becomes even more evident when compared historically with other international language institutions operating in Brazil, as it is shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1.** *Timeline of Linguistic and Cultural Institutions in Brazil*

Country	Institution	Foundation	Arrival in Brazil
France	Alliance Française	1884	1885
UK	British Council	1934	1945
Germany	Goethe-Institut	1951	1956
Spain	Instituto Cervantes	1991	1998
China	Confucius Institute	2004	2008

Source: Balestro, 2025, p. 43.

As Balestro (2022, 42) observes, the Confucius Institute reached 162 countries within its first 18 years of existence, while the Alliance Française, established in 1883, reached 137; the Instituto Cervantes, founded in 1991, expanded to 43 countries during its first three decades.

The success of a language's international promotion depends on multiple factors, and contemporary decisions to study a foreign language involve considerations such as perceived difficulty, learning time, and potential professional benefits. While European languages benefit from long-established prestige, the growing interest in Mandarin is driven by a diverse combination of cultural, economic, and geopolitical motivations. To better understand this expansion, the following section examines the development and standardization of the Chinese language and the reforms that shaped the variety promoted today by Chinese institutions.

#### 4. The Confucius Institute Network

The Confucius Institute system constitutes China's largest global platform for the promotion of Chinese language and culture. The first CI was inaugurated in Seoul in 2004; by 2022, the network had expanded to 162 countries and regions, with 1,311

units, including fully established Confucius Institutes and smaller Confucius Classrooms (“Confucius Unstitute Annual Development Report 2022” - CIADR22<sup>2</sup>). Unlike other cultural institutes such as the Goethe-Institut or Alliance Française, CIs operate exclusively through bilateral academic partnerships: each unit must be jointly established by a local higher-education institution and a Chinese partner university. These cooperation agreements are typically valid for five years and require approval from the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC), the governmental body responsible for the CI network.

Once established, partner institutions are authorized to:

- ✓ offer Chinese language courses;
- ✓ conduct cultural outreach activities;
- ✓ administer proficiency examinations such as the HSK and HSKK;
- ✓ promote study-abroad programs, summer camps, and thematic training in China;
- ✓ receive Chinese volunteer teachers; train and certify local teachers of Chinese.

In Brazil, CIs have increasingly diversified their partnerships beyond university campuses. Some CI units collaborate with government agencies—including the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the Federal Police—while others provide instruction for tourism professionals or for public high schools participating in bilingual education initiatives.

#### **4.1. The Confucius Institute in Brazil: National Presence and Institutional Model**

As of 2024, Brazil hosts 11 Confucius Institutes and one Confucius Classroom, spanning 10 states and the Federal District. These units vary in structure, course offerings, and local partnerships, but all operate under a co-directorship model, with one director representing the Brazilian institution and another representing the Chinese partner university. Financial arrangements are also bilateral: the Chinese side provides initial funding for installation and both partners share subsequent operational costs. Tuition fees tend to be kept relatively accessible to ensure greater participation from students and the external community.

In addition to university-level programs, some CIs collaborate with public education systems. In the State of Rio de Janeiro, for example, the *Dupla Escola* program has established bilingual Portuguese–Chinese tracks in public high schools. In São Paulo, a previous partnership between the state Department of Education and the CI-Unesp offered Mandarin to students in the state’s secondary schools.

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://ci.cn/en/gywm/nb>.

Although CIs have faced criticism in some Western countries—particularly the United States and parts of Europe, where concerns have been raised regarding governance and academic freedom—these debates have had minimal impact in Brazil. Brazilian CIs continue operating without significant public controversy, and scholars such as Ma (2018) emphasize that the critiques reflect local political anxieties more than the actual functioning of the institutes.

The global expansion of the CI network has been remarkable: with just two decades of existence, it already exceeds older institutions such as the Alliance Française in terms of geographical coverage. According to Sharma (2022), more than nine million learners worldwide have enrolled in Confucius Institute programs since 2004.

In the following sections (4.1.1 and 4.1.2), this study presents two Case Studies of CIs established in Brazil:

#### 4.1.1. *Case Study 1 — Confucius Classroom at the Federal Fluminense University (CC-UFF)*

Mandarin courses were first offered at UFF in 2018 through their local Program in Modern Foreign Languages (Prolem). These initial classes, taught by a Brazilian instructor, had an average of twelve students per group and were open to participants aged 16 and older.

In 2019, UFF formalized a partnership with Hubei Normal University, establishing the Confucius Classroom (CC-UFF) as an on-campus teaching center open to the broader community. A Chinese volunteer teacher joined the staff, and all Mandarin classes became centralized under the CC's administration.

The unit's mission, according to their webpage, is “to bring China and Brazil closer through the teaching and dissemination of the Chinese language and culture”. Its Chinese director, Ana Qiao, is a prominent figure in ChLE promotion in Brazil and has been honored in the official CIADR22 report for her leadership in developing bilingual education programs and for her role in establishing the Municipal Day of the Mandarin Language in Rio de Janeiro (Law Project 749/2021).

The CC-UFF has also been recognized as Brazil's top-performing HSK test center for two consecutive years, an achievement highlighted in the CIADR22. Its online presence is particularly active: the unit frequently promotes lectures, cultural events, proficiency test information, and general educational content about China. These virtual activities significantly broaden its reach beyond the immediate campus community.

#### 4.1.2. Case Study 2 — Confucius Institute at the University of Brasília (CI-UnB)<sup>3</sup>

The CI-UnB operates in a dedicated building on the UnB campus, located within the Center for Excellence in Tourism. The space is decorated with Chinese cultural elements and houses a library of more than ten thousand volumes donated by the Chinese partner institution or by the Chinese Embassy.

Established through a partnership with Dalian University of Foreign Languages, the CI-UnB began offering courses in 2009. According to interviews with the institute's administrative coordinator, the CI organizes language courses at multiple levels, thematic short courses (such as programs focused on travel in China), and a wide variety of cultural events intended to promote Chinese language and culture within the university and the wider community (UnBTV 2016).

The CI-UnB plays an important role in strengthening educational cooperation between Brazil and China by facilitating scholarships, exchange opportunities, and academic mobility. During the V ENFOCO conference, in 2023, the CI-UnB shared internal data illustrating significant growth: from 2009 to 2022, the unit enrolled 2,653 students across 288 classes, despite a temporary decline during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to community courses, the institute also offers Mandarin as an elective undergraduate subject since 2018, with high demand and long waiting lists each semester. The program currently offers sequenced levels (Basic 1 to Basic 4), with approximately 20 students per class.

The institute uses the *New Practical Chinese Reader* (3rd ed.) as its primary textbook. Instructors often supplement the textbook with additional materials in Brazilian Portuguese, adapting activities to learners' linguistic backgrounds and local needs.

## 5. Conclusion

The Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms in Brazil illustrate a complex interplay of linguistic promotion, cultural diplomacy, educational cooperation, and public image shaping. Through accessible language courses, active cultural programming, and growing partnerships with governmental and educational institutions, CIs and CCs have steadily increased the visibility of Mandarin and the broader Chinese cultural sphere within Brazil.

From the perspective of a ChLE instructor who has taught in both units analyzed here, it is evident that these institutions not only support China's global

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<sup>3</sup> Unit where the author currently teaches Chinese as a foreign language

language policies but also meet concrete local demands from Brazilian students, professionals, and institutions seeking to engage with China. Their growth reflects both Brazil's interest in learning Mandarin and China's strategic investment in soft power and international education.

The Brazilian experience reveals that the international expansion of Mandarin teaching is not a one-way process of cultural transmission, but a negotiated field in which global language policies encounter local imaginaries, expectations, and pedagogical choices. Classroom practices—such as the adaptation of teaching materials, the inclusion or omission of China's internal linguistic diversity, and the ways in which "Chinese culture" is framed—play a crucial role in either reinforcing exoticized representations or fostering more critical, dialogic understandings. Recognizing Confucius Institutes as spaces of both soft power and mutual learning invites further empirical research on how students and teachers in Brazil appropriate, question, and transform the official narratives that accompany Mandarin teaching, and how these processes reshape Sino-Brazilian academic cooperation.

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