



The representation of Chinese language and culture through coverage of language education in the French press

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Résumé : Les stéréotypes sont souvent créés à partir d'informations de seconde main majoritairement véhiculées par les médias. Au moment où les divergences des besoins de développement nationaux font monter les tensions, le rôle de l'éducation des langues revêt une importance stratégique. Comment les médias ont-ils couvert ce sujet ? Cette question mérite une exploration en profondeur notamment concernant la langue de l'empire du milieu. Nous avons réalisé une analyse longitudinale de 2004 à 2023 dans le cadre de la presse française. Nos résultats révèlent que ce sujet a bénéficié d'une exposition médiatique élevée derrière l'anglais et l'allemand alors que seulement 0,7% d'élèves du secondaire apprenaient cette langue en 2016. A l'inverse des articles sur l'éducation de l'anglais et de l'allemand, le prisme et le nombre des articles de presse sur l'éducation du chinois ne sont pas corrélés à l'agenda politique, mais à l'évolution du nombre d'apprenants. L'éducation du chinois en France a été présentée dans l'ensemble comme une source rare d'ouverture et d'enrichissement à la fois économique et culturelle, le statut économique de la Chine et l'altérité des langues et cultures chinoises étant positivement perçus comme des facteurs de motivation.

Mots-clés : représentation ; langue ; culture ; Chinois ; médias ; éducation, France

Title: The representation of Chinese language and culture through coverage of language education in the French press

Abstract: Stereotypes are often created on the basis of second-hand information, mainly conveyed by the media. At a time when divergent national development needs are increasing tensions, the role of language education is of strategic importance. How have the media covered this issue? This question deserves to be examined in depth, particularly with regard to the language of the Middle Kingdom. We carried out a longitudinal analysis of the French press from 2004 to 2023. Our results show that this subject received a high level of media coverage behind English and German, despite the fact that only 0.7% of secondary school students were learning the language in 2016. Unlike articles on English and German education, the prism and number of press articles on Chinese education are not correlated with the political agenda, but with the evolution of the number of learners. Overall, Chinese language education in France was presented as a rare

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source of economic and cultural openness and enrichment, with China's economic status and its linguistic and cultural otherness being positively perceived as motivating factors.

Keywords: Representation; Language; Culture; Chinese; Media; Education; France

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Introduction

At a time when divergent national development needs are increasing tensions in the world, second and third language education plays a strategic role. Cultural aspects of societies have been overlooked by the traditional general-interest media (press, TV, radio), which mainly cover economic and political news, whereas they are fundamental to social interactions between people from different countries.

How these media have covered this issue deserves an in-depth exploration, particularly as regards the language of the Middle Kingdom. Academic articles examining the development of Chinese language and culture in the world have often focused on the Confucius Institute (CI) and its controversies. However, CI and political concerns may not be representative of Chinese language educational activities in general, nor of people's attitudes and perceptions. Our article is the first attempt to study this particular media phenomenon through lexical and linguistic analysis.

Our findings reveal that there was substantial coverage of issues relating to Chinese linguistic education in France from 2004 to 2014, then a progressive decline until a total lack of coverage in 2023. The overall representation of Chinese language teaching and learning in France displayed a strong positive tone. Five themes have been identified through lexical analysis: **1.** The opening of new Chinese language classes in secondary school is good news; **2.** Confucius Institutes are cooperative partnerships; **3.** Traditional cultural activities such as calligraphy, painting and cuisine are emphasised in the Chinese language teaching. **4.** The motivating factors of Chinese language learners are both economic and cultural. **5.** The Chinese language is distinctive in its phonetics and its script. Our linguistic analysis shows that China's economic status and the otherness of Chinese language and culture are positively perceived as motivating factors. The press coverage emphasized cultural enrichment and spiritual opening, and also tended to argue against the stereotype of Chinese as a difficult language.

Analysing the media representation of Chinese language education in France on a long-term basis gives us a general idea of what all the stakeholders including politicians, heads of educational institutions, teachers, students, parents, journalists, newspapers' readers in France think about Chinese as a global language and the cultural values that implies. It also allows us to discuss from an evolutionary perspective the social anchoring hidden behind these news stories in the light of the news values theory and the social representation theory.

Literature review

Previous research about China's media representation in western countries can be summed up by two main characteristics: the affirmation of China's status as a global power; and the fear of China as a threat. The China threat theory has been developed first in political sciences. The media representation of China as a threat was identified in the US print media as early as 1992. From 1995 onwards, China was not only represented as an economic, political and ideological threat but also increasingly a military and strategic threat (Yang and Liu, 2012). *The Washington Post* reported in January 2019 that the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT) had indicated particular downturns in 2013 of the overall global media tones about China (Brazys and Dukalskis, 2019). A Report entitled "*China's soft power in Europe falling in hard times*"ⁱ published in April 2021 by European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC)ⁱⁱ confirmed that European public opinion towards China in 2020 was even more negative.

Cultural aspects of the country were still insufficiently covered by the traditional media (Willnat and Luo, 2011). The category "culture/arts/education" occupied only around 3% of China-focused news in European transnational newspapers (Zhang, 2010). In front-page stories, it became even too small to be a distinct category. This overlooked category is actually a fundamental aspect of today's global world which is multilingualistic and multicultural. Language is integrated into a set of values and norms called culture. Language and culture exert powerful influences on people's minds and contribute to structuring social interactions (Koester and Lustig, 2010).

The representation of foreign languages was mainly studied in didactics. It is often stereotyped among learners (Cain, 1984). A strong correlation was confirmed between the image of a country for the learner and the representation of his or her own learning experience of that country's language (Castellotti and Moore, 2002). For French learners of Chinese language, the most popular stereotype was that this language is difficult and the cultural distance is huge (Bouvier, 2010). Additionally, the greater the cultural distance was, the more effort was required to adapt socio-culturally (Furnham and Bochner, 1982).

Existing articles studying Chinese language education in the fields of global language status (Gil, 2011) and language planning in the west were especially found in North America and Australia (Bianco, 2007; Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; Liu and Bianco, 2007; Wang, 2007). Moreover, those focusing specifically on CI were mostly through the lens of China's soft power and the ideological struggles (Starr, 2009; Hartig, 2012; Huang, 2023). CI created a stronger sense of otherness and led to negative perceptions (Huang, 2023). CI's controversy raised two concerns: 1. CI is a sinister attempt to extend Chinese political control activities to Western universities; 2. CI spreads communist party culture in the name of Chinese culture (Hartig, 2012). In 2021, the U.S. Senate denied the Department of Education funding for American universities that host CIs unless they meet oversight requirements. Many CIs have closed recent years. There are currently 525 CI around the world, including about 150 in Europe of which 17 are in Franceⁱⁱⁱ, 31 in the UK, 21 in Spain, 19 in Germany, 12 in Italy. The distribution of CI around the world reflects China's trade situation with countries, not the political alliances of the past on a global scale (Starr, 2009).

No research has been found about social representation of Chinese language and culture through the lens of education in media studies.

Data

The main corpus consists of 744 articles with 248872 words in total on Chinese language education in the national and regional press. Among these 744 articles, 705 are from the regional press, 39 from the national press. The data are supplemented by 121 articles on the teaching of English and 68 on the teaching of German in the national press during the same period of twenty years from the 01/01/2004 to 31/12/2023. All the articles come from six national newspapers (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Les Echos*, *Libération*, *La Croix*, *Aujourd'hui en France*) and eight regional presses (*Ouest France*, *Sud Ouest*, *La Voix du Nord*, *Le Parisien*, *Le Télégramme*, *Le Progrès*, *La Montagne*, *La Nouvelle République*). They were accessed through the Europress database: <https://nouveau.europresse.com/>.

Articles dealing mainly with the Chinese, English or German language education were selected. Those dealing with languages in general, without our targeted languages being the main topic, were excluded. Other related topics such as Chinese students in France or personal portraits (linguists, artists, French young professionals working in China, etc.) were also excluded.

Methodology

In this paper, we carried out a long-term analysis because it is the most appropriate to draw an overall picture and to reflect an evolutionary view. In parallel, to gain perspective, we adopted a comparative approach, by including English and German language education during the same period in the national press.

Having first quantified the intensity of media coverage of Chinese language education per year, we then conducted a textual semantic analysis using both lexical and linguistic methods.

We used Alceste software to assist our lexical analysis by khi2 logic in order to identify themes and their key words. This lexical analysis shows which are central and peripheral themes of the represented object (Abric, 1994). The linguistic analysis is relevant to identify subsequent relationship between central and peripheral themes (Molinier, 1996).

We chose to focus on central key words “difficult” and “economic+” previously identified in the lexical analysis to examine opinions, attitudes and stereotypes displayed by media articles about Chinese language and culture. The word “different” was also added into our analysis. Two quotients are particularly applied to the key words: frequency and co-occurrence. Frequency is the popularity index of the words. Co-occurrence shows the relations between the different words, by calculating the simultaneous presence of two or more elements in the same context unit (Bardin, 2013).

Finally, all the figures obtained through Alceste software-assisted analysis will be presented in the results part in its original French language version to avoid any possible misinterpretation caused by translation.

Results

A wide media coverage focusing on the increasing number of Chinese language learners

In order to quantify the media coverage intensity on the topic of Chinese language education, we compare the national press coverage from 2004 to 2023 of the five most widely learned languages in France, which were English (99.2% of the total students in 2017), Spanish (57%), German (15.7%), Italian (4.9%) and Chinese (0.7%) in 2016. As the most learned second language, English teaching was covered by 121 articles in the national press, followed by German with 68 articles and Chinese with 39 articles. Spanish and Italian had only 5 and 2 articles respectively.

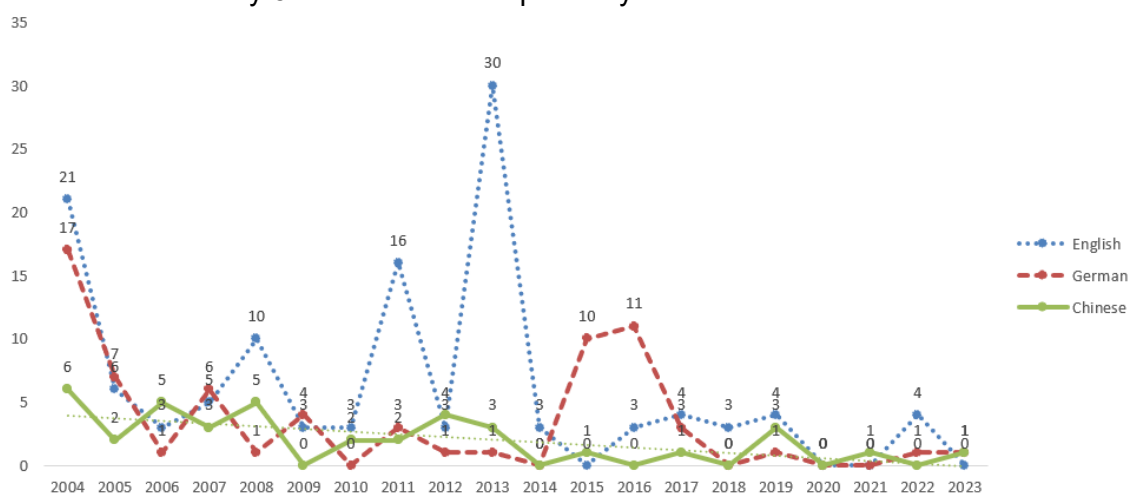


Figure 1: Numbers of articles about English, German & Chinese Education in the French National Press

Media coverage of English and German shared a common feature: these two languages had much higher exposure in a few particular years than others, specifically in 2004, 2008, 2011 and 2013 for English with 2013 the highest; in 2004, 2015 and 2016 for German with 2004 the highest. The lexical analysis revealed that news coverage on English and German education during these particular high media coverage years featured mainly language policy reforms corresponding to political agendas.

The content about German-language education from 2004 to 2023 can be summarized by the continuing fall in the number of learners and the French government's political support for the teaching of this language. When the socialist Minister of Education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem requested the abolition of the English-German bilingual classes in the spring of 2015, the debates were especially covered by *Le Figaro*. The English-German bilingual classes had been previously installed by the right-of-center party. They were actually part of a general strategic policy framework to strengthen neighbourly relations with the aim of building Franco-German leadership within the EU. The high coverage then continued during the whole year of 2016.

As of English-language education, the peak of the media coverage happened in 2013 when Geneviève Fioraso, Minister of Higher Education and Research, announced a bill to promote programs taught in English language in French universities. A very heated debate took place in the press then. It was perceived by some French intellectual elites

that promoting programs taught in English could be a threat to the development of national scientific research in French language. Another high-profile topic of discussion during the whole period of 20 years was the early teaching of English to children in kindergarten.

Unlike English and German, Chinese language education has no period of high media exposure corresponding to language policy reform. The coverage of French national and regional press on this topic was linked to the number of Chinese language learners. Particular higher exposure was noticed when there were more new classes opening, especially from 2004 to 2013.

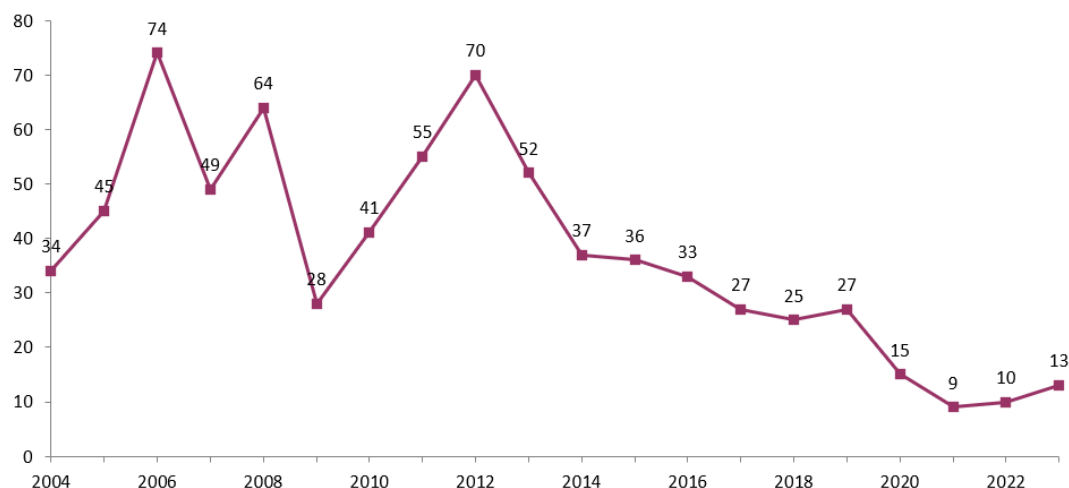


Figure 2: Media Coverage of Chinese Language Education in French National & Regional Press from 2004 to 2023

In 2007, Chinese language changed its status by overtaking Portuguese and Russian, becoming for the first time the 5th most learned language in France behind English, German, Spanish and Italian. By 2016, Chinese learners were nearly twice as numerous as learners of Portuguese and around three times as numerous as learners of Russian and Arabic. 2006, 2008 and 2012 were three years which recorded the highest numbers of news articles. 2012 was a peak year especially because of the unusual increase of article numbers in certain regional newspapers - for example, 14 articles for *Le Progrès* in 2012 compared with 2 in 2011; 8 for *La Voix du Nord* in 2012 compared with 1 in 2010. Overall, Brittany is the region with the highest number of learners of Chinese. The Breton regional newspaper *Ouest France* was also the biggest publisher of news on the subject.

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total number of students	5418031	5371368	5339719	5331729	5353216	5415587	5421987	5472782	5497135	5536418	5579354
English	5271144	5234909	5215580	5221420	5265593	5331088	5339909	5400380	5431305	5431305	5532714
%	97,3	97,5	97,7	97,9	98,4	98,4	98,5	98,7	98,8	98,9	99,2
Spanish	2147645	2118769	2117741	2187572	2292744	2394267	2459391	2526926	2593230	2641326	3181322
%	39,6	39,4	39,7	41	42,8	44,2	45,4	46,2	47,2	47,7	57
German	822064	823376	823399	822384	826021	828377	832057	836811	837046	841511	877914
%	15,2	15,3	15,4	15,4	15,4	15,3	15,3	15,3	15,2	15,2	15,7

Italian	235357	230105	224710	223741	229012	230168	229728	231481	233425	236207	274209
%	4,3	4,3	4,2	4,2	4,3	4,3	4,2	4,2	4,2	4,3	4,9
Chinese	12461	15489	18759	19315	20966	23951	27188	30152	33455	36215	38850
%	0,2	0,3	0,4	0,4	0,4	0,4	0,5	0,6	0,6	0,7	0,7
Portuguese	12223	12939	13066	13381	14296	14903	15479	15655	16221	16906	18183
%	0,2	0,2	0,2	0,3	0,3	0,3	0,3	0,3	0,3	0,3	0,3
Arabic	6561	6512	6468	6178	6849	9182	9483	9626	10446	11211	13041
%	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,2	0,2	0,2	0,2	0,2	0,2
Russian	14707	14418	14220	13723	13683	13420	12582	12348	12264	12430	12299
%	0,3	0,3	0,3	0,3	0,3	0,2	0,2	0,2	0,2	0,2	0,2

Table 1: The Numbers of Languages' Learners at Secondary School in France (2006-2016)³

Five representation themes about Chinese language teaching

Our Alceste software assisted lexical analysis reported 76% high relevance with the text units classified in five themes. The first theme containing 32.50% of the text units confirms that the central element of the representation of Chinese language education is its growth in secondary school. The second theme containing 20.59% of the text units is about Confucius Institutes under “*Hanban*” which are qualified as cooperative partnerships. The third theme (18.35%) reports on activities of Chinese language teaching: calligraphy, painting, art, cuisine, exhibition, trip, workshops, etc., including in associations outside secondary schools. The fourth theme containing 17.42% of the text units is about attitudes to Chinese language and its acquisition in France. The fifth theme (11.14%) consists of the specific characteristics of the Chinese language and its perception as difficult.

³ Table drawn up by the author using data from “*Repères et Références Statistiques*” published by the French government. From 2017 onwards, only data about the number learners choosing Chinese as the third “living language” has been published: 18618 in 2017, 18736 in 2018, 17463 in 2019, 14341 in 2020, 12570 in 2021, 10445 in 2022. It should be noted that the decline in the number of Chinese language learners is under the general context of fewer students choosing the option of a third living language from 2019 onwards. At the start of the 2022 academic year, they were 3.6%, compared with 6.8% in 2016.



Figure 3. Five Themes about Chinese Language Education in the French Press

The first theme reports the facts (what, where, when, who). Teaching (“enseignement”) Chinese as a living (“vivant”) language was a new “option”, “class” or “section” for pupils (“élève”) at the next start (“prochaine” “rentrée”) in institutions (“établissements”) in different “academies”. “Academy” is a geographical classification by the administration of French National Education Ministry. “Living language” is the expression commonly used in France to call second and third language. “Second” here in means the first year in “high school” (lycée); “Sixth” (sixième) means the first year in middle-school (“collège”). Holy (“saint”) is a frequent word appeared in the names of private Catholic schools in France. Despite the appearance of this word, there are no statistics from the French Ministry of Education attesting that the majority of pupils learning Chinese are in these schools. The presence of the words English (“anglais”) and German (“allemand”) is due to the simple fact that both are often mentioned in parallel with Chinese language teaching, either because of English-Chinese bilingual classes or in contrast with the decline in the number of German language learners.

The second theme describes Confucius Institute, subordinated to “*Hanban*” as a cooperative partnership or relationship between universities, supported by embassies (“ambassades”), “regional” councils (“conseil”) and “provinces”. Brittany (“Bretagne”) region, “*Shandong*” province, “Rennes” and “Poitiers” cities were quantitatively the most significantly mentioned in the regional press. CI was by the way a highlighted theme in 2021 in the national newspapers *Le monde* et *Libération*. It is worth remembering that

in 2021, there were only 9 articles on Chinese language education in the regional and national press.

The third theme displays the main traditional cultural activities related to Chinese language teaching: calligraphy, cuisine, art, painting (“peinture”), exhibitions (“exposition”), trips (“voyage”), workshops (“atelier”) in the evenings (“soirée”) or on Saturday (“samedi”), Friday (“vendredi”), Thursday (“jeudi”), or at the occasions of the Chinese New Year “Festival” which falls often in “February”. Cultural “associations” are actively involved.

In the fourth theme, words exhibiting opinions and attitudes toward Chinese language learning (“apprendre”) are: advantage (“atout”), “desire”, “fascinated”, “love” “motivation”. Being “able” to “speak” Chinese is good for “work” thanks to the country’s (“pays”) economic, market (“marché”) and commerce in the world (“monde”), but also for “spirit”. Girls appear more prominently in this theme than boys. This theme will be focused for further examined in the next linguistic analysis section.

The fifth theme is about the specific characteristics of Chinese language itself. It can be summarized in writing (“écriture”) and reading (“lire”): word (“mot”), “characters”, “ideograms”, non-“alphabetic” “sinograms”; in oral pronunciation: (“prononciation”), phonetic (“phonétique”), tones (“tons”); in grammar, conjugation and “phrases”. The word. This keyword “difficult” as a qualifier will be further analyzed in the next section.

China’s economic status is significant, but can’t explain everything

Linguistic analysis determines the causal relationships. The relationship is called paralogical or horizontal when the analysis of the elements is determined by grammatical, logical or syntagmatic rules (Grize, 1993). It deals with the question of “how it is discussed”. (Fallery and Rodhain, 2007), in other words, it concerns the media framing which is about values that journalists choose to establish to explain news stories (Entman, 1993). The fourth theme gathers the relevant text units for the linguistic analysis.

The co-occurrence network of the key words in this theme is organized around the central word “economic”. The peripheral words which have the most numerous co-occurrences with the central word “economy+” are: “global”, “power”, “country”, “professional”, “world”, “social”, “future”, “growth”, “speak”, “advantage”, etc. (Fig. 4). The paralogical relation can be summarized as the following sentences composed with the central and peripheral key words: The Middle Kingdom, a fast-growing global economic power in the world, is a dynamic big country. The motivation to speak Chinese is that it’s an important professional advantage for the future of the youth.

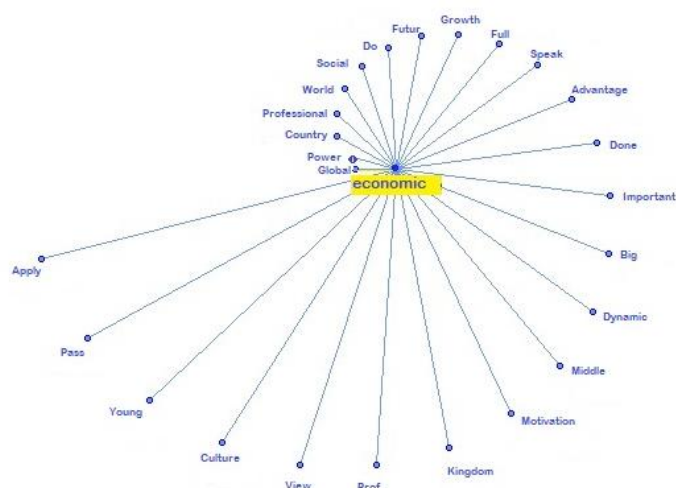


Figure 4. Network of the central word “economic” with its peripheral words.

However, the economy does not explain everything. Among the most significant words of the second theme, as Figure 3 shows: “desire”, “fascinated”, “spirit”, “love” are complementary explanatory elements in Class 4. In other words, the Chinese language would never have grown so rapidly if there had not been desire and love on the part of the students for this fascinating language itself and the spirit of this culture.

The Chinese language is difficult but less than you might think!

We focused on the sentences containing “difficult” and “different”, two popular qualifying elements of Chinese language and culture.

The importance of an element increases with its frequency. As for the frequency listing rule, weighting reflects the intensity of an element. The frequency per year of the two key words “difficult” and “different” have been counted when they are qualifier elements. The total frequency of the word “difficult” is 138, that of the word “different” is 75. The word “difficult” is therefore much more intensive than the word “different” throughout the text. As showed the Figure 3, “difficult” appears in Class 5 but not “different”.

According to Osgood’s method (Bardin, 2013) for frequency weighting, we coded the word “difficult” at each occurrence by giving it 3 qualitative directions: -1, 0, +1.

Unfavourable = -1, the opinion confirms that Chinese is a difficult language.

Favourable = +1, opinion confirms that Chinese is not difficult.

Neutral/ambivalent = 0, opinion is neutral or ambivalent.

By counting frequencies by direction, we obtained the intensity of the word “difficult” per year and according to the user of the word. Teachers have the highest positive score 9, followed by “others” 1. “Others” include Chinese language inspectors, principals, parents or representatives of Chinese cultural associations. Students get the score of -2. They’re a mixture of pupils in primary and secondary school, university students and adult learners in associations. Journalists’ opinions have the highest unfavorable intensity -33.

Furthermore, it’s necessary to consider the characteristics of journalistic writing to adjust the intensity of the word “difficult”, because mentioning the difficulty of Chinese may be

a preliminary to further develop other ideas or questions in discourse. Sometime, presupposing that Chinese is difficult is in order to contradict it later. We therefore applied corrective coefficients. Six cases were identified. Here are two examples of the coefficients +1 and +2 applied to correct the intensity weighting of “difficult”:

Neutral 0, corrective coefficient +1

“But isn’t it a very difficult language to learn? This myth must be broken.” (Le Télégramme, 09-10-2004)

Unfavourable -1, corrective coefficient +2

“It is customary to say that Chinese is a difficult language. That’s what Mrs. Bonneau denies: ‘It’s different, not transparent, but not really hard. In Chinese, there are no conjugations, no genders, no declinations.’ (La Nouvelle République, 27-03-2015)

A total of 11 points were administered. Finally, the direction of the references to Chinese remains unfavorable. But its intensity is reduced to -15.

Year	Professor s	Pupils Students	Others	Journalist s	Correction coefficient	Total
2004	-1	0	0	-2	4	1
2005	1	-3	/	-1	/	-3
2006	1	/	0	-8	/	-7
2007	2	3	/	-5	/	0
2008	3	1	/	-8	/	-4
2009	-1	-3	/	-1	/	-5
2010	1	/	/	0	/	1
2011	1	1	/	-2	/	0
2012	-1	3	/	-2	3	3
2013	-2	-1	/	-1	/	-4
2014	1	-1	1	-1	/	0
2015	-1	-1	/	-1	2	-1
2016	2	/	/	-1	/	1
2017	2	/	/	-2	/	0
2018	-1	/	/	1	/	0
2019	/	-1	/	+2	/	1
2020	/	/	/	/	/	/
2021	/	/	/	/	/	/
2022	1	/	/	-1	2	1
2023	1	/	/	/	/	1
TOTAL						
L	9	-2	1	-33	11	-15

Table 2. Intensity of the Word “Difficult” according to source of opinion

The source of opinion shows that the perception of the degree of difficulty depends on the opinion holders’ profile. The total score of -15 indicates a more favourable media representation of Chinese language itself and its learning experiences than what the general opinion could have assumed, as indicates the journalists’ score of -33. Hence, the stereotype of Chinese as being a difficult language has been reduced in these media articles by reflecting various stakeholders’ opinions on this topic.

Discovering such different language and culture opens your mind and even more!

The word “different” as a qualifier element appears 75 times in the textual database. The co-occurrence of this word with the verbs allow (“permettre”) and bring (“apporter”), shows the relationship with the consequence of discovery (“découvrir”) which is both an outcome and an objective. The adverbs so much (“tellement”) and really (“vraiment”) are intensifiers. They were used to highlight the otherness of Chinese language and culture in comparison with French ones. That means it is precisely the big linguistic and cultural distances that make the leaning effect of discovery rewarding.

Among the co-occurrences between “different” and “culture”, “culture” is related to three semantic meanings. It is first mentioned alone without a precise description with words such as “whole” and “world”. Then come way of thinking (“penser”), logic (“logique”), mentality, philosophy, vision, insight, *etc.* The third aspect of the Chinese culture is related to lifestyle (“vie”), landscapes, behaviors, habits (“habitudes”), *etc.*

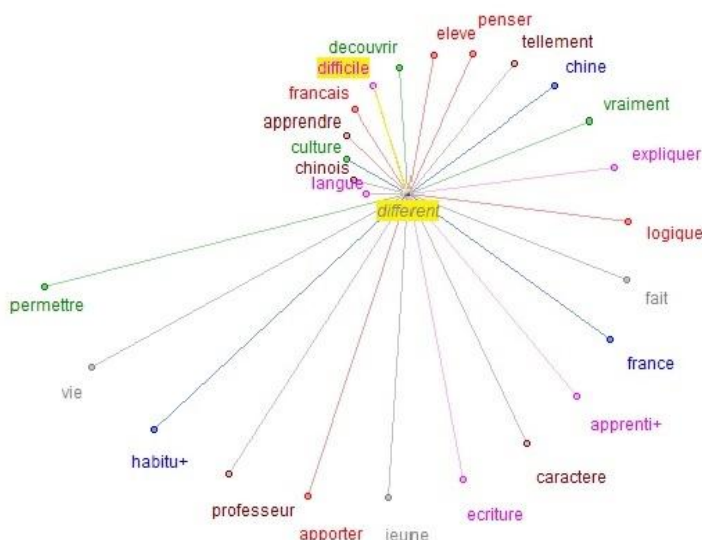


Figure 5: Network of the central word “different” with its peripheral words.

Furthermore, the expressions attesting to attitudes towards cultural differences are: “curiosity”, “openness”, “adaptation”, “enrichment”, “advantage”, “interesting”, “important”, “charmed”, “attracted”, “envy”, “love”, *etc.* In other words, the interest and the desire for learning Chinese lie in the discovery of the difference bringing openness. Chinese language acquisition’s consequence is perceived as a positive “cultural distinction” (Tajfel, 2010) for the learners with respect to other members of the French society.

Some students testified to their motivation by their taste for challenge and the development of self-esteem. Additionally, work-related values such as rigor, regularity, concentration and patience were also promoted.

“Francoise Moreux concludes that she was hired by Air France because of her knowledge of Chinese but also because of the open-mindedness she had gained by frequenting a different culture.” (La Montagne, 21-11-2011)

“Why learn Chinese? There are many reasons: to open up to the world, develop autonomy, adapt to another way of thinking, write with care and rigor, speak several languages and compare them, develop self-esteem...” (Le Télégramme, 24-04-2018)

In summary, the experience of Chinese language acquisition is much more positive than might be expected both because of the reported lower intensity of the linguistic difficulty and the highlighted benefits of being culturally different from the learners' point of view.

Discussion

The wide coverage under the theoretical framework of news values

Media primarily reflect social facts through their choice of news topics. Media “Framing” refers to selection and salience. News is selected and formulated according to some aspects of a perceived reality (Entman, 1993). In other words, it is the result of media “framing” that Chinese language education was chosen to be a news topic. The criteria defining the news values are particularly relevant to explain the wide but declining coverage on the topic of Chinese language education in the French press over 20 years. Here below are five non-exhaustive criteria.

The first criterion of news values is celebrity (Bell, 1991). When stories concern powerful individuals, organizations, institutions, they are more likely to be published. The importance that the media have given to the development of Chinese language education is linked to China's global status. The fact that China's global status doesn't fit the status of the Chinese language education in France makes the choice of this topic convincing. Chinese language is commonly classified as a “rare language” by the French Ministry of Education, while it is the language with the most users in the world.

The second criterion is “Follow-up”. Stories about subjects already in the news (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017) are more likely to be published. Chinese language teaching is a permanent activity which can be followed year by year. Our observed period starts in 2004 when the CI was launched worldwide. The largest number of articles about Chinese mandarin teaching and learning occurred in 2006. Updating the information in the following years corresponds to the logic of “Follow-up”.

The third criterion is “Proximity”, geographical closeness. (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). It was the regional newspapers that reported the most news on this topic because this news concerned the schools in the cities or regions where the readers of these newspapers live. The geographical proximity also concerned the CIs, which were created in collaboration with French universities located in different cities or regions.

The fourth and fifth explanatory criteria are “Recency” and “Unexpectedness” (novelty). Stories which have just happened are valuable. When they are unexpected or surprising, they have even more value. Chinese mandarin is a distant language rarely taught and learned in France comparing to English, Spanish, German and Italian. The opening of new classes teaching Chinese, especially in the first years from 2004 to 2007, was a novel phenomenon at that time. Chinese became unexpectedly the 5th most taught language in 2007 in secondary school while it was still classified as “rare language”. From 2012 onwards, the topic was gradually losing its values of recency and

unexpectedness, leading to a near total lack of interest. Interestingly, the media coverage over 20 years is correlated to the number of learners but not to the change in the number of learners. From 2018 on, the number of Chinese learners began to fall. The decline of Chinese language learners was not chosen by media because the number of learners remaining small was neither new nor unexpected. It's just not a valuable news topic according to the news value theory.

The openness to otherness in view of social representation theory

The taxonomy of news values (Galtung and Ruge, 1965) shows that the value of a news item depends on the way in which the media work. It's related to framing and frames. Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time (Entman, 1993). Analyzing the mass media content is equivalent to analyzing the "constitutive thinking" that gives form and meaning to content and the core values according to which media discourses are constructed and propagated (Doise, 1992). Consequently, studying social representation of Chinese language education in France demonstrates not only French people's opinions, attitudes and stereotypes about the represented object but also, more importantly, the core values which have shaped French people's constitutive thinking.

The core value according to which media shaped a favourable representation of Chinese language education was the openness to otherness. We suggest that this may be linked to two anchoring factors related to the French society. The first is the symbolic values of the French language education in the forging of a historical French cultural identity. The second is the effect of an effective implementation of more recent EU multilingual policies in France.

"Francien", a dialectal variety of the old French, was spoken in the Île-de-France region, where the royal court had settled. This dialect gradually evolved into standard French, which, by the 17th century, had become the prestige language in many Northern and Eastern European courts. Two thirds of the French population spoke only a variety of old regional languages on the eve of the French Revolution. The standardisation of the French language became a key policy in the construction of the national identity of the new French Republic through education since 1789 (Siguan, 1996). In colonial times, using French as a medium of instruction within the colonies' education system was a policy of the first order for cultural assimilation purposes. *Alliance Française*, the emblematic institution of the *Francophonie* was by the way established since 1883. This is much earlier than its European equivalents - the *British Council* in 1934, the *Goethe Institute* in 1951, the *Cervantes Centre* in 1991 – or the even more recent Chinese *Confucius Institute* launched in 2004.

With this in mind, the unusual lack of political debates about CI could be supported by the socially anchored perception of the symbolic language education values in the French monolingual traditions. Language symbolises the core value of its culture. Language education is of the first importance to learn a culture. The French regional press was mostly content to report the simple fact that French regional governments were involved in setting up CIs and supporting linguistic and cultural exchange. Overall, isn't it what local authorities are supposed to do in order to increase educational opportunities, enrich local cultural lives and by doing so to prepare future global economic exchange? The same may be applied to the national press. In comparison

with concerns of CI that the French national press didn't avoid to discuss deeply, the development of Chinese language education in France was a valuable source to frame more interesting news stories in terms of important benefits and values to learn such a different language and culture.

Apart from France's traditional monolingualism, the favourable representation of Chinese language education may also be relevant to the more recent multilingualism that France has adopted as part of the European Union. The European policy of multilingualism has been built on the basis of respect for linguistic and cultural diversity of the EU's member states (Pilhion, 2008), whereas its supranational cultural diplomacy in external relations encourages expedient soft power considerations to cultivate the spirit of global cultural citizenship (Isar, 2015).

The traditional national monolingualism started to give way to the European multilingualism as early as the 1990's (Costa and Lambert, 2009). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) published in 2001 by the Council of Europe provided a set of common guidelines for member states to draw up national foreign language programs. The aim of CEFR was to train multilingual citizens with a sense of belonging to a European community while respecting national cultural identity. The European multilingual policy has provided an open environment where French students are free to choose up to 3 living languages to learn. Regional minority languages such as Basque, Occitan and other non-European state languages – Chinese, Arabic or Hebrew - have all benefited from this open environment. But in a different way to Arabic or Hebrew which are mainly heritage languages linked to immigration, China's global status and its economic power are key factors contributing to the development of Chinese language education in France. Chinese language isn't just a heritage language. A large proportion of learners are not Chinese immigrants' descendants in France.

Last but not least, in contrast to Chinese, German and English language teaching has not been framed in the same way in the French national press. As official languages of the EU, national policy issues of these two languages were key. It was not the case with the Chinese language. This contradiction can be understood in the light of the two-folded multilingualism. On the one hand, to cultivate an internal coherence of the European cultural identity is an important political issue; On the other hand, to encourage the spirit of global cultural citizenship is a socially shared value.

Conclusion

Mass media are often called the "fourth estate" because of their countervailing effect on the exercise of political power. It would be biased for media and communication research articles to focus exclusively on authoritarian determinism (Guan, 2019). It is encouraging to see the extent to which, despite a climate of global crisis with increasing tensions between nations, the overall attitudes and opinions towards the spread of Chinese language education have been positive in France over a long time period. The stereotype of Chinese as a difficult language has been attenuated. The otherness of Chinese culture, China's global status and its economic power have been favorably perceived as an enrichment. We argue that the underlying reasons for this positive media coverage can be found first in the theory of news values. The contrast between China's global

status and that of Chinese language as a “rare” or “small” language in the French education system provides interesting ingredients to frame news stories around the core value of the openness to the other. The social representation theory supports us to argue that the openness to the otherness is rooted both in France’s traditional national monolingualism and the more European multilingualism well assimilated in France.

It has been demonstrated that cultural perception is important for economic exchanges between countries. Lower trust leads to less trade (Guiso et al., 2009). The wide coverage and the favorable representation of Chinese language education in French media suggests that a positive cultural perception has promoted higher trust of French people on the power of Chinese culture and consequently the economic benefits. Our research has several limitations. First, it focuses only on French press. Radio, TV and other new types of media haven’t been included. Second, our findings can only explain the decline of media coverage of Chinese language education in France but not the decline of Chinese language learners within the French education system. Finally, our paper is limited to the national level of France. Despite certain commonly shared similarities by European countries, a better understanding of this issue at a larger scale must be further researched under other specific contexts.

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The original material analyzed in this article is in French. We have tried to remain faithful to the tone as well as the literal meaning of the original words and phrases in our redaction in English.
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ⁱ Here is the link to download this report: [China's Soft Power in Europe: Falling on Hard Times | Ifri](#)

ⁱⁱ Here is the link to learn more about ETNC: [European Think-tank Network on China \(ETNC\) | Ifri](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ The source for the number of CI in the world and in France comes from [institutconfucius.fr](#)