

Learning language or understanding culture? Discussions about the objectives of including the Chinese language in the state school of Rio de Janeiro /

Aprender língua ou conhecer cultura? Discussões sobre os objetivos de inclusão de língua chinesa na rede estadual do Rio de Janeiro

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, we have witnessed the expansion of Chinese language teaching not only in higher education institutions in Brazil with the establishment of Confucius Institutes, but also through the initiatives of several municipal and state governments that seek to offer the public a multilingual education. In the specific case of the state of Rio de Janeiro, the Joaquim Gomes de Sousa State Mathematics School – Intercultural Brazil-China was created in 2015, through a partnership between the State of Rio de Janeiro and the *Hebei* Normal University (China). Based on the documentary study and interviews, we intend to discuss how the high expectations of Chinese teachers regarding the linguistic proficiency of their students clash with the Brazilian reality, and how agents of the two nationalities negotiate and adapt to create more realistic objectives in relation to the teaching of Chinese language and culture within a state school. It is necessary not only to have a greater understanding between the two educational cultures, but also a joint effort between teachers, managers and formulators of linguistic and educational public policies to bring about a language-culture education that makes sense to students in the public school system in Brazil.

KEYWORDS: Language and Culture; Chinese Language Teaching; Brazil-China Intercultural High School; Confucius Institute.

RESUMO

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Nos últimos anos, vivenciamos a expansão do ensino de língua chinesa não só nas instituições superiores do Brasil com o estabelecimento dos Institutos Confúcio, mas também através das iniciativas de diversas redes municipais e estaduais que buscam oferecer ao público uma educação plurilíngue. No caso específico da rede estadual do Rio de Janeiro, foi criado em 2015 o Colégio Estadual Matemático Joaquim Gomes de Sousa – Intercultural Brasil-China, por meio de uma parceria entre o Estado do Rio de Janeiro e a Universidade Normal de Hebei (China). Partindo das próprias experiências da autora como professora de chinês neste Colégio, o presente trabalho pretende realizar uma reflexão sobre as diferentes percepções dos agentes chineses e brasileiros neste projeto, em relação aos objetivos da inclusão de língua e cultura chinesa na rede estadual do Rio de Janeiro. Baseado no estudo documental e nas entrevistas, pretendemos discutir como a alta expectativa dos professores chineses em relação à proficiência linguística dos alunos entra em choque com a realidade brasileira, e como os agentes das duas nacionalidades se negociam e se adaptam para criar objetivos mais realistas em relação ao ensino de língua e cultura chinesa dentro de um colégio estadual. É necessário não só um maior entendimento entre as duas culturas educacionais, mas também um esforço conjunto entre os professores, os gestores e os formuladores das políticas públicas linguísticas e educacionais para trazer uma educação de língua-cultura que faça sentido para os estudantes da rede pública do Brasil.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Língua e Cultura; Ensino de Língua Chinesa; Colégio Intercultural Brasil-China; Instituto Confúcio.*

1 Introduction

What are the objectives of learning a foreign language in modern society? According to various authors (Duarte; Santos; Lima, 2011; Galli, 2015; Mendes, 2015; Scheyerl; Barros; Santo, 2014), our initial responses may align with utilitarian goals such as communicating with foreigners, passing exams, securing better jobs, or living in another country. However, language learning can go beyond linguistic knowledge and communicative skills to encompass more formative and intellectual domains, such as accessing information or knowledge in other languages, reflecting on one's identity through understanding others, and gaining contact with different perspectives to develop a more comprehensive worldview and a critical stance. As Scheyerl; Barros; Santo (2014, p. 169), state, intercultural education has become one of the major goals of language teaching in contemporary times. These authors argue that intercultural education can transcend the structural understanding of language and redefine foreign language teaching, contributing to the development of a more reflective and democratic awareness of diverse values and identities.

This issue becomes even more complex when it involves learning the Chinese language, often considered one of the most challenging languages for Brazilians, particularly in public schools, where foreign language education holds a relatively peripheral position. According to Rodrigues (2010), there are strong trends of de-officialization and commercialization of foreign language education in Brazil, creating a divide between its role in public schools and in private courses. While the former is often associated with scarcity, ineffectiveness, and failure, the latter is

linked to enjoyment, efficiency, and success. For the majority of public schools, the goal of achieving a high level of linguistic proficiency may undergo adjustments, given the constraints imposed by the country's educational and social contexts.

Nevertheless, these linguistic representations were unfamiliar to the Chinese partners involved in establishing the Joaquim Gomes de Sousa State Mathematics School – Intercultural Brazil-China¹ in 2015. The school was part of the Intercultural High School strand of the Dupla Escola program by the Rio de Janeiro State Department of Education (SEEDUC/RJ), under the framework of integral education. This program involved cooperation between SEEDUC/RJ, international language and culture promotion institutions from various countries, and diplomatic entities such as embassies and consulates. In the case of the Brazil-China Intercultural High School, the Chinese language and culture classes were initially taught by Chinese teachers from the Confucius Institute, China's leading organization for promoting its language and culture abroad. This school was significant for the Confucius Institute as it was the first Brazilian public school to include Chinese as a mandatory subject in its curriculum. Its creation aligned with China's strategy to integrate its language into the basic education of other countries to expand its global outreach.

The author of this text worked at the Brazil-China Intercultural High School as a Chinese teacher for the Confucius Institute. Before assuming the position, she was informed that the Chinese name of the school was *里约葡中双语中学*, meaning “Portuguese-Chinese Bilingual High School of Rio de Janeiro”, and that the graduates would continue their studies in China. For the Chinese, with limited knowledge of Brazil's educational context, this fostered an image of an elite school where all students were fluent in both languages. This image was also crucial for gaining support from the Chinese partner university and the Confucius Institute Headquarters² at the time. Drawing references from bilingual schools in China, the “Portuguese-Chinese Bilingual High School of Rio de Janeiro” was envisioned by the Chinese to prepare Brazilian students fluent in Chinese to pursue higher education in China.

¹ Its' original portuguese name is *Colégio Estadual Matemático Joaquim Gomes de Sousa – Intercultural Brasil-China*. Henceforth, we will refer to the school as the Brazil-China Intercultural High School. At the beginning of 2022, SEEDUC/RJ established a school of the same modality in Duque de Caxias, named CIEP 097 Carlos Chagas - Brazil-China. However, the Brazil-China Intercultural High School mentioned in this work refers exclusively to the Joaquim Gomes de Sousa State Mathematics School – Intercultural Brazil-China.

² This organization underwent restructuring during the Confucius reform in 2020 and ceased to exist. The management of Confucius Institutes worldwide is currently under the responsibility of the Chinese International Education Foundation.

However, these objectives were somewhat unrealistic given Brazil's socio-educational circumstances, where foreign languages are not typically learned in public schools, and few state school students plan to study abroad. At the time the author worked at the school, Chinese teachers faced significant challenges in helping students achieve high language proficiency and felt unsuccessful in realizing the initial goals. To improve the situation, they explored new pedagogical strategies and actively participated in teacher training organized by the Confucius Institute. Nevertheless, we want to emphasize the importance of broader social and educational contexts of both countries, which profoundly influence the role of foreign languages in public education and their goals within the school curriculum.

Thus, this study aims to present in detail the differing perspectives on the role of the Chinese language at the Brazil-China Intercultural High School, taking into account the historical and social contexts of both countries. The methodological approach adopted for this research is qualitative, combining bibliographic study and interviews. The bibliographic study includes theses and articles published in major Chinese linguistics and social sciences journals, addressing the history, characteristics, and future challenges of foreign language education in China, all available in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI, *中国知网*)³ database. It also analyzes SEEDUC/RJ resolutions and the Pedagogical Political Project (PPP) of the Brazil-China Intercultural High School to better understand the Brazilian perspective on the role of Chinese in the school. The interviews were conducted with various stakeholders from the Brazil-China Intercultural High School, both Chinese and Brazilian, throughout 2023⁴. These interviews are discussed in more detail in the fourth section of this text. In order to provide better context for the perspectives of the Confucius Institute's Chinese teachers, we will firstly present a brief overview of foreign language teaching in China and its main characteristics, emphasizing its strong utilitarian nature that shapes the whole teaching-learning process.

2 A utilitarian perspective on foreign languages in China

Foreign language learning in China has been predominantly shaped by a technicist and utilitarian perspective developed over the past 150 years, during which foreign languages were

³ Available at: <https://www.cnki.net/index/>. Accessed: 22 jul. 2024.

⁴ The data used in this chapter are part of the *corpus* of the author's doctoral dissertation, with the project approved by the Ethics Committee in 2022 - CAAE: 60737122.1.0000.8160.

seen as a key for the Eastern empire to access new knowledge from the West. Today, foreign language courses hold a significant weight in the Chinese school curriculum, with English being a mandatory subject for all Chinese university students. These experiences have profoundly influenced the perceptions and pedagogical practices of Chinese teachers working in Confucius Institutes abroad.

2.1 Foreign language education in China

Throughout Chinese history, government macro-control has had a substantial impact on the inclusion and exclusion of foreign languages in education, aligned with the political and economic needs of the time. According to Zhao (2020), who studied the history of foreign languages in Chinese basic education, foreign language teaching in ancient China originated as a byproduct of translation activities driven by central authority, serving diplomatic purposes. From the 19th century onward, Western incursions acted as external forces that propelled foreign languages into basic education. The *Imperial School Statute*⁵ of 1902 was the first in Chinese history to establish English instruction in secondary schools for the general population, while also offering French and Japanese as alternatives. Since then, foreign languages became a crucial part of the educational system, as they provided access to modern Western knowledge, especially in exact sciences. The goal was to enable the populace to better understand the nation and the world, facilitate the acquisition of Western knowledge in higher education, and promote international exchange across various domains.

Still according to Zhao (2020), With the founding of the People's Republic of China, Russian became the primary foreign language taught in schools, serving as the initial and fundamental medium for Sino-Soviet exchanges and cooperation, which were essential for China's industrialization and modernization under Soviet assistance. However, following the 1978 Reform that prioritized economic development, foreign language education became depoliticized and commodified (Shen, 2017), with English emerging as the dominant foreign language due to its economic and political significance globally. Over time, English became synonymous with foreign languages, and its study became mandatory for nearly all students in both basic and higher

⁵ In the original: 《钦定学堂章程》. It was the first officially promulgated educational system in the history of Chinese education, but it was not implemented due to the social instability of the time and the government's limited capacity for reform.

education. Today, as China seeks to play a more active role in multilateral relations and global governance, a reform of the high school curriculum was initiated in 2018, introducing six languages (English, Japanese, Russian, German, French, and Spanish) as options in university entrance exams. The goal is to cultivate multilingual professionals who go beyond English dominance.

Thus, foreign languages have been viewed as an indispensable tool for Chinese modernization, occupying a significant role in the school curriculum. On the one hand, their importance for national development has granted them high status in the education system, remaining a core subject in high school and a mandatory course in higher education. On the other hand, this exaggerated emphasis on the instrumental value of foreign languages has obscured their essence (Zhang, 2017), leading to a perception that they are merely tools for acquiring other knowledge.

This utilitarian perspective is also reflected in the market economy, both at national and individual levels. By “investing” in foreign language learning, individuals acquire linguistic capital, which offers benefits such as economic returns, access to higher education, or career advancement. This exchange value is measured by exams and certifications, often causing Chinese learners to focus on passing exams and gaining academic and professional advantages. Consequently, the main content in foreign language classes revolves around linguistic knowledge assessed in exams, such as vocabulary and grammar. Communicative methods, while encouraged, face limitations due to large class sizes and exam pressures in regular education.

The emphasis on exams has resulted in the neglect of cultural education in foreign language teaching in regular Chinese schools. The few cultural elements present in textbooks are fragmented and lack systematicity, serving merely as “decorations” at the end of each lesson. According to Zhang (2017):

Current foreign language education in our country is still seen as a mere pursuit of knowledge and skills, not as the cultivation of humanistic qualities. Foreign language education has never had a clear concept of cultural teaching, never established a consciousness of cultural teaching, and never attributed importance to the functions of cultural teaching. The value of cultural elements in foreign language teaching has never been given its due status and recognition (Zhang, 2017, p. 8, our translation⁶).

⁶ In the original: 我国当前的外语教育仍然被视作一种纯粹知识和技能的追求，而不是一种人文素养的培育。究其根本，是因为我国的外语教育始终没有明晰文化教学的理念、确立文化教学的意识、重视文化教学的功能，没有将外语教育中文化元素的价值提升到应有的地位和高度。

As a result, cultural knowledge and activities are often viewed as a waste of time in Chinese classrooms, especially in high school, where preparing for university entrance exams is the main objective. Even when cultural topics are addressed, they tend to be superficial “fast-food” culture, lacking a deeper understanding of Western thought. Another challenge in addressing cultural issues lies in the political sensitivity of Western cultural elements, as school education is tightly controlled by central authorities. Viewing foreign languages as tools and instruments creates a space for “neutral” and “safe” linguistic knowledge, avoiding potentially sensitive topics altogether.

2.2 Teaching Chinese as a foreign language at the Confucius Institute

In 2004, China launched its ambitious policy for the international promotion of the Chinese language with the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in Seoul. With robust state support, by the end of 2023, 496 Confucius Institutes and 757 Confucius Classrooms⁷ had been established across 160 countries and regions⁸. According to the *Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes* (2006), their objective is to:

[...] meet the needs of people from all countries (regions) to learn Chinese and enhance their understanding of the Chinese language and culture. Strengthen educational and cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and other countries around the world, develop friendly relations between China and foreign countries. Promote multicultural development globally and build a harmonious world (Constitution and By-Laws of the Confucius Institutes, 2006, p. 1, our translation⁹).

The teaching of Chinese at the Confucius Institutes reflects the foreign language education model that Chinese teachers have experienced in China, which is strongly characterized by its utilitarian and technicist nature. At its core, the global promotion of the Chinese language is embedded in a utilitarian vision aimed at expanding its influence worldwide. As the “language of the future”, Chinese is associated with the rise of the world's largest emerging economic power,

⁷ Confucius Classroom is an institution similar to the Confucius Institute but on a smaller scale and with lower investment. Many Confucius Classrooms are located in primary or secondary schools and are subordinate to a Confucius Institute. However, there are also independent Confucius Classrooms that operate in the same way as a Confucius Institute.

⁸ According to the Confucius Institute Annual Development Report (2023). Available at: https://ci.cn/en/qkylxq?file=/profile/upload/2024/07/03/471606610_20240703165613A988.pdf. Accessed: 22 jul. 2024.

⁹ In the original: 孔子学院致力于适应世界各国（地区）人民对汉语学习的需要，增进世界各国（地区）人民对中国语言文化的了解，加强中国与世界各国教育文化交流合作，发展中国与外国的友好关系，促进世界多元文化发展，构建和谐世界。

offering significant advantages in the job market and economic benefits. These narratives are frequently employed in the promotion of the Confucius Institutes and often serve as the primary motivation for learners worldwide.

In Confucius Institute classrooms, the most notable feature is the emphasis on structural knowledge of the language and the four basic communication skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing). Chinese teachers place significant importance on exams within the scope of the Confucius Institute, especially the official Chinese language proficiency test HSK¹⁰. The HSK certificate serves as proof of linguistic competence for academic and professional purposes and is also a requirement for applying for scholarships to study in China.

Although language is inherently tied to culture, and learning a language involves engaging with its culture, language and culture are relatively separated in the Confucius Institute's curriculum. Language instruction follows a utilitarian approach in the classroom, while cultural education takes place outside regular courses through extracurricular cultural activities. Programs that better integrate language and culture, such as exchange initiatives and summer courses in China, are limited to a small group of students with financial means and require HSK certificates, further justifying the emphasis on test preparation by Chinese teachers.

This strongly neoliberal perspective also aligns with the approach often found in private schools or foreign language courses in Brazil, where the goals focus on developing high levels of linguistic competence and passing official proficiency exams. However, in the context of public schools, the situation is drastically different. Is it possible to expect Brazilian public school students to achieve high levels of proficiency? What objectives for foreign language teaching best align with the needs of public school students? In the case of the Brazil-China Intercultural High School, Chinese teachers transplanted the Confucius Institute's teaching model—designed for language courses linked to an international institution—into the context of a public high school in Rio de Janeiro. This practice stems from the educational reality in China, where public and private schools are not as polarized as they are in Brazil. Following the objectives of the Confucius Institute, the Chinese team aimed to help the students achieve a high level of proficiency in Chinese to pass certification exams and participate in exchange programs in China.

¹⁰ The abbreviation of the Chinese name *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* (汉语水平考试), means the “Chinese Proficiency Test”.

3 Objective in Brazilian documents: moving towards a bilingual school

Chinese teachers from the Confucius Institute joined the Brazil-China Intercultural High School with a clear goal: to train Brazilian students to become fluent in Chinese and capable of continuing their studies in China. However, did the Rio de Janeiro State Department of Education (SEEDUC/RJ) and the actors involved in the Intercultural School program share this vision? In this section, we analyze different perspectives regarding the inclusion of the Chinese language and culture in the state school curriculum of Rio de Janeiro, based on official documents and the Political Pedagogical Project (PPP) of the Brazil-China Intercultural High School.

The guiding documents from SEEDUC/RJ that define the implementation of the intercultural school program include *Resolution SEEDUC No. 5.330/2015* and *Resolution SEEDUC No. 5.424/2016*. According to the former:

The Full-Time Intercultural Model for General High School Education promotes the development of foreign language proficiency, ensuring integrated pedagogical actions that value cultural aspects and interculturality, prioritizing the development of youth leadership, and shaping autonomous, conscious, and critical young people, [...] (Art. 55, SEEDUC/RJ, 2015, our translation¹¹).

The 2016 resolution maintains a similar focus on interculturality:

In the Intercultural dimension, the educational pathway provides students with cultural exchange and foreign language proficiency, valuing interculturality, enhancing cognitive learning, and fostering youth leadership (Art. 7, SEEDUC/RJ, 2016, our translation¹²).

Both documents highlight the importance of foreign language proficiency development, as well as the appreciation of cultural aspects and interculturality. These principles largely align with the Chinese partners' vision for the project, although with varying degrees of ambition regarding the expected proficiency level. However, the resolutions do not specify the desired proficiency level or provide a clear definition of interculturality. This lack of precision allows for diverse interpretations and negotiations among the actors during implementation.

¹¹ In the original: O Modelo em Tempo Integral Intercultural, para formação geral do Ensino Médio, promove o desenvolvimento da proficiência em língua estrangeira, garantindo ações pedagógicas integradas, que valorizem aspectos culturais e a interculturalidade, priorizando o desenvolvimento do protagonismo juvenil, formando jovens autônomos, conscientes e críticos, [...].

¹² In the original: Na dimensão Intercultural, o percurso formativo oferta ao estudante o intercâmbio cultural e a proficiência na língua estrangeira, valorizando a interculturalidade, potencializando a aprendizagem cognitiva e o desenvolvimento do protagonismo juvenil.

The Political Pedagogical Project (PPP) of the Brazil-China Intercultural High School in its early years, titled “Interculturality Between Brazil and China”, presents an educational proposal that aims to integrate Brazilian and Chinese cultures. Below are some general objectives outlined in the PPP of 2015 (p. 12-13, our translation¹³):

- Promote youth education in Mandarin and English;
- Provide opportunities for students to become responsible and autonomous citizens;
- Focus studies on exact sciences;
- Enable intercultural exchanges for students in China;
- Prepare young people for the job market.

A notable phrase is “youth education in Mandarin¹⁴” which suggests an intention to position the school closer to a bilingual model, as indicated by its official Chinese name, “Portuguese-Chinese Bilingual High School of Rio de Janeiro”. The specific objectives of the PPP also mention the aim to “facilitate the acquisition of foreign language skills, primarily in English and Mandarin, enabling fluency” (PPP, 2015, p. 13, our translation¹⁵). Since the PPP was jointly developed by the school’s managers and teachers, it is evident that, in the project’s early years, there was an ambitious expectation for students to achieve high proficiency in Chinese. Thus, the initial project of the intercultural school aims to provide quality education within the public school system in Rio de Janeiro and prepare students for studies abroad, aligning with language teaching practices found in private schools and language courses.

4 Learning the language or understanding the culture?

Since its establishment in 2015, the Brazil-China Intercultural High School has undergone significant changes, both within the school itself and in the broader educational and social context. Examples include the elimination of student selection for admission starting in 2016, the suspension

¹³ In the original: Promover a educação dos jovens em Mandarim e em Língua Inglesa; proporcionar oportunidades para que os alunos possam se tornar cidadãos responsáveis e autônomos; estabelecer o foco dos estudos em ciências exatas; propiciar o intercâmbio intercultural de nossos alunos na China; preparar os jovens para o mercado de trabalho.

¹⁴ In relation to the designation of the standard language of China, this paper adopts the terms “Chinese” and “Chinese language”, while the official documents of SEEDUC/RJ and the Brazil-China Intercultural High School use the term “Mandarin”. In our research, we understand that all three terms refer to the same object, which is the current standard language of China (*Putonghua*).

¹⁵ In the original: facilitar a aquisição de conteúdos das línguas estrangeiras, principalmente o inglês e o mandarim, possibilitando a fluência.

of integrated planning by the teachers due to lack of funding in 2017, and the temporary absence of Chinese teachers during the pandemic in 2020. As a result, the ambitious goals of achieving fluency in Chinese and pursuing studies in China have become increasingly out of reach for most students at the school.

In response, the school introduced two new subjects as part of the New High School Curriculum (*Novo Ensino Médio*) in 2022: *Fundamentals of Culture*, focused on Chinese culture, and *Artistic Language*, with an emphasis on Chinese art. Consequently, Chinese culture has taken on an increasingly prominent role within the school, gradually replacing the emphasis on the Chinese language, which has weakened due to various external factors.

This shift prompts a theoretical examination of the type of culture being addressed at the school and its relationship to language teaching and learning. When we talk about culture in the context of foreign language teaching, two notions have exerted significant influence on classroom pedagogical practices: the first follows the anthropological tradition and defines culture as "the totality of characteristics of a social group" (Mendes, 2015, p. 207); and the second is the notion of national culture (Megale, 2019, p. 76), considering cultures always linked to a specific country or nation. Mendes (2015) criticizes that culture often appears in foreign language classrooms as an illustration or as content to be taught, especially those elements that, in common sense, represent the cultural richness of a people, such as folk festivals and traditions. We should adopt a more contemporary view of cultures, considering them dynamic and heterogeneous, shaped by historical and social contexts and constantly transformed through contact with other cultures. The author emphasizes the importance of going beyond merely mastering linguistic forms and cultural curiosities in foreign language learning, but learning "the way of being and living" (Mendes, 2015, p. 219, our translation¹⁶) in the new language and culture.

Returning to the case of the Brazil-China Intercultural High School, how is the issue of culture addressed, and what is its relationship with the Chinese language? After all, what would be the main objective of including the Chinese language and culture in the State education system? Does the linguistic or cultural focus predominate? To better understand the opinions of the different stakeholders involved at the school, we conducted a series of interviews throughout 2023 based on the following questions: What is the objective of including Chinese language and culture in the

¹⁶ In the original: o modo de ser e viver.

school curriculum? Is it possible to require high proficiency in the Chinese language from our students? What role does culture play in this initiative?

4.1 The Interviews

The interviews were conducted throughout 2023 with the authorization of the Ethics Committee and the Sub-Secretaries for Educational Management of SEEDUC/RJ. A semi-structured format was used, allowing for in-depth exploration of the topic while maintaining a manageable scope of information. A total of 16 participants contributed to this research, representing stakeholders from various levels and both nationalities involved in the design and implementation of the Brazil-China Intercultural School. To ensure the anonymity of participants, professional roles were used instead of names, as summarized in the table 1:

Table 1: Basic Information on Interview Participants

Participant	Brief Information	Abbreviation
Current SEEDUC/RJ Manager	Brazilian nationality. Current coordinator of the Strategic Projects Monitoring Coordination under the Superintendence of Strategic Projects at SEEDUC/RJ.	CSM
Chinese Director of the School	Chinese nationality. Current director of the Confucius Classroom at UFF (2018–present) and the Chinese director of the Brazil-China Intercultural High School since its inception in 2015.	CDS
Former Coordinator of Confucius Institute Teachers in Brazil	Chinese nationality. Chinese language teacher at the Confucius Institute at PUC-Rio (2015–2017), former coordinator of Confucius Institute teachers in Brazil, and responsible for Chinese projects at Colégio Pedro II and Instituto Gaylussac (2018–2019). Currently the director of the Portuguese Department at a higher education institution in China.	FCC
Former Director of the School	Brazilian nationality. Portuguese teacher. Joined the Brazil-China Intercultural School at its inception in 2015. Served as school director between 2018 and 2019.	FDS
Current Director of the School	Brazilian nationality. Physics teacher. Joined the Brazil-China Intercultural School at its inception in 2015.	CDS
Former Chinese Teacher at the School	Chinese nationality. Chinese language teacher at the Confucius Institute at PUC-Rio (2017–2018) and a Chinese teacher at the Brazil-China Intercultural School during the 2017 school year.	FCT
Chinese Teacher at the School	Chinese nationality. Chinese language teacher at the Brazil-China Intercultural School in the 2018, 2022, and 2023 school years.	CTS

Brazilian Chinese Language Teacher at the School	Brazilian nationality. Teacher of Portuguese, English, and Chinese. Joined the Brazil-China Intercultural High School at its inception in 2015 and completed Chinese language teacher training at Hebei Normal University (China) in 2018–2019.	BCT
Brazilian Chinese Culture Teacher at the School	Brazilian nationality. Responsible for the Fundamentals of Culture (Chinese Culture) subject since late 2022 with the implementation of the new curriculum.	BCCT
Brazilian Chinese Art Teacher at the School	Brazilian nationality. Art teacher at the Brazil-China Intercultural High School since 2018. Responsible for the Artistic Language (Chinese Art) subject since late 2022 with the implementation of the new curriculum.	BCA
Former Students of the School	Brazilian nationality. A group of six former students of the Brazil-China Intercultural School, including five female students who enrolled in 2017 and graduated in 2019, and one male student who enrolled in 2018 and graduated in 2020.	FSS

Source: Compiled by the author (2024).

All interviews were recorded, resulting in a total of 342 minutes of audio, which were subsequently transcribed. Brazilian participants spoke in Portuguese, while Chinese participants conducted their interviews in Chinese. The Chinese interviews were first transcribed in the original language and then translated into Portuguese for analysis. After transcription and translation, excerpts were categorized by theme. For this study, we specifically selected passages discussing the objectives of teaching Chinese language and culture at the school, as well as the relationship between language learning and cultural understanding.

4.2 Interviewees' Testimonials

In line with the objectives outlined in the documents created in the early years of the school's establishment, older stakeholders such as the former director, the former Chinese teacher, and Brazilian teachers who joined the project from the beginning have a relatively higher expectation regarding the Chinese language proficiency of students. The local Chinese teacher, who has been with the school since its inception, stated that the initial goal of the project was to prepare students to speak Chinese well and go to China for undergraduate studies.

The objectives of speaking the language well, studying in China, and enhancing students' prospects in the job market were frequently mentioned by various interviewees. However, the current manager of SEEDUC/RJ emphasized other more important goals. She explained that the project was not a technical course but an “expansion of students’ sociocultural repertoire”. In

relation to the creation of intercultural schools, her perspective leans more toward intercultural education than language instruction itself. In her words:

So, for us, [...] proposing this type of curriculum matrix already represents a change in educational paradigms. It's about gaining access to another culture, thinking in a non-hierarchical way. In general, this student tends to think of other peoples in a much more horizontal way, not vertical, with one culture overlaid on another. He looks at the culture as equal to equal. My culture is different, as is yours, but we... one is not overlaid on the other. It's knowledge. We understand that knowledge about others diminishes... even prejudice, xenophobia. In general, we move society to understand and connect with the different. A different culture, whether it's a culture or people. [...] And with this, socially, for society, for us to live together, it reverberates differently. This student understands, connects, respects, and obviously, if there is no hierarchical relationship with another culture, this respect is likely to be mutual. So, socially, we improve the coexistence among peoples (CSM, 2023, our translation¹⁷).

The current manager of SEEDUC holds a more cultural view, aiming to broaden students' sociocultural repertoire and encourage them to think about cultures in a more equal way. Regarding the decline in students' language competencies, the interviewed head acknowledged the limitations preventing students from reaching a high level of language proficiency, such as the limited time, with high school only covering three years of students' formative journey, few class hours, and crowded classrooms in public schools. According to her, reaching an advanced level of Chinese will be an individually pursued goal based on the students' desire, rather than a collective requirement. About the difficulties that Chinese teachers faced in preparing students to study in China, she mentioned Brazil's socio-historical context:

Many of these young people, they do not envision a life of studies because work has to come first, as it's related to the survival of their family. So sometimes we think it's disinterest, they just want to finish so they can work and help their parents buy food for the house [...] Often it's a lack of self-esteem. They think they can't because they've been told their whole life that they can't. Going to university is not for them. Having a good job is not for them. They're

¹⁷ In the original: Então, para a gente, [...] já é uma mudança de paradigma educacional propor um tipo de matriz curricular nesses modos. Porque é ter acesso a uma outra cultura, é pensar não de forma hierarquizada. Então, de maneira geral, esse aluno já tende a pensar outros povos de uma forma muito mais horizontal e não vertical, a sobreposição de uma cultura para outra. Ele já olha essa cultura de igual pra igual. A minha cultura é diferente, a de vocês, mas a gente... um não está sobrepondo o outro. É conhecimento. Isso a gente entende também que conhecimento sobre o outro diminui a... inclusive preconceitos, xenofobias. De uma maneira geral, a gente movimenta a sociedade para entender e se conectar com o diferente. Uma cultura diferente, seja uma cultura, seja pessoas. [...] E aí, com isso, socialmente, para a sociedade, para a gente viver em sociedade, isso se reverbera de uma outra forma. Esse aluno, ele entende, ele se conecta, ele respeita e, obviamente, se ele não tem uma relação hierarquizada com uma outra cultura, essa relação de respeito tende a ser mútua. Então, socialmente a gente melhora o convívio entre os povos.

meant to do menial jobs. They don't need to study so much, they just need to know how to add and subtract, to speak. [...] You have to say the same thing so that generations start to change in their minds, that they can. So, it's more than "look, I'm giving it to you and you have to accept it". Because they get home and there's a whole generation behind them who didn't think this way because it wasn't allowed for them (CSM, 2023, our translation¹⁸).

In other words, what lies behind the students' disinterest is Brazil's history memory and the generations of subordinated family members who didn't see education as a transformative power. These ideas contrast with those of Chinese teachers, who come from a society that places a high value on education, where the belief that education transforms destiny is deeply ingrained in every individual's mindset. They take this belief as a universal principle and automatically create high expectations for Brazilian students, hoping they will seize the opportunity that learning Chinese offers and use it to change their lives.

With the arrival of the pandemic in 2020, the Chinese teachers from the Confucius Institute returned to China, and the school temporarily lacked Chinese language teachers. In 2022, along with the reform of the curriculum introduced by the New High School model, the number of Chinese language classes was reduced from four to two weekly sessions. However, the directors of the Brazil-China Intercultural High School negotiated with SEEDUC/RJ and incorporated new subjects about Chinese culture and Chinese art into the new curriculum, with the names of *Foundations of Culture* and *Artistic Language*. According to the school director, this initiative is part of the school's efforts:

[The new curriculum] increased the cultural content. We insisted that it should be Chinese culture. It wasn't meant to be. We adjusted it here to make it happen. Because it wasn't. It was supposed to be Brazilian culture. And we have a criticism here. It was supposed to be an Art teacher, right? To teach Brazilian culture. And we put in Chinese culture. How long we'll manage to maintain this, we don't know [...] But then we have another problem. The teachers are doing this on their own. It's the Brazilian teacher who is doing it. They have no training for it. They are completely unprepared. They are doing research with materials from the library, which are in Mandarin, and putting together their classes. So, they are creating the lesson plans on their own. Most

¹⁸ In the original: Muitos desses jovens, eles não projetam uma vida de estudos porque o trabalho tem que vir antes, porque tem a ver com a subsistência da própria família. Então, às vezes, a gente vai achar que é desinteresse, ele só quer terminar para poder trabalhar logo, para poder ajudar o pai e a mãe a comprar comida pra dentro de casa [...] Muitas vezes é uma falta de autoestima. De achar que ele não pode porque colocaram na cabeça dele a vida inteira de que ele não pode. De entrar numa universidade é coisa que não é pra ele. De ter emprego bom não é pra ele. Que ele tem que fazer trabalhos subalternizados. Que não precisa estudar tanto, ele só precisa saber fazer somar e subtrair, saber falar. [...] você tem que falar a mesma coisa para que gerações comecem a mudar na cabeça delas, que elas podem. Então, é mais do que "olha, estou te dando e você tem que aceitar". Porque ele chega em casa e tem uma geração inteira atrás dele que não achava isso porque não foi permitido isso para elas.

of them have never been to China. And there is no material. We can't find any material for a teacher to give a class. But they're making it work. But I think it could be better if we had the materials (CDS, 2023, our translation¹⁹).

It was a very positive attempt by the school to bring China back to the students and include more Brazilian teachers in promoting the Chinese language and culture in the school. Given the shortage of qualified teachers to teach the language, the only way to maintain the "Brazil-China" name was to include subjects about Chinese art and culture, as it was more feasible for Brazilian teachers to learn about the culture than the language itself in a short time. But what kind of culture is being addressed here? According to the director, teachers use materials available in the library, relying on fixed content that explores certain representative aspects of China's cultural richness. Considering that most of the teachers have never been to China and have not received specialized training, it is likely that the content presented in these two subjects is shaped by a Brazilian perspective, failing to offer students a truly transformative view or a new way to live and understand the world.

The first Chinese teacher returned to the school after the pandemic in September 2022. Regarding the inclusion of the new subjects in the updated curriculum, she is interested in the initiative but not fully convinced about the results, especially with the high workload that has occupied the time of Chinese language and other subjects of university entrance exams. In her words:

Regarding Chinese culture and art, I think the class hours can be reduced, and more time can be given to Chinese language and the subjects that are part of the university entrance exam, so students can focus more on learning the most important things. Because everyone's time and energy are limited. If they dedicate too much time to culture, they will be spiritually cultivated, but lose out on the vestibular exams and then miss the opportunity to visit China, which isn't worth it. What's really useful for Brazilian students are Chinese language classes, which can help them pass the HSK exam and go to China to experience true Chinese culture. There are also subjects in exact sciences that can help them pass the exam and enter university and ideal courses. These culture and art classes aren't particularly useful for the students, so they get

¹⁹ In the original: [O novo currículo] aumentou a cultura. Nós que colocamos que tem que ser cultura chinesa. Que não era pra ser. Nós que aqui ajeitamos pra que fosse. Porque não era. É a cultura brasileira ali. E até uma crítica que nós temos. Aqui era pra ser um professor de Arte, né? Pra dar cultura brasileira. E a gente botou cultura chinesa. Até quando a gente vai conseguir manter a gente não sabe [...] Só que aí nós temos um outro problema. Os professores estão sozinhos para fazer isso. Quem faz isso é o professor brasileiro. Ele não teve formação para isso. Ele está totalmente sem formação. Ele está fazendo uma pesquisa com o material que tem aqui na biblioteca, que está em mandarim, e está montando a aula dele. Então, quer dizer, ele está montando a aula dele sozinho. A maioria deles nunca foi na China. E não tem material. Nós não encontramos material para um professor dar uma aula. Mas eles estão se virando. Mas eu acho que poderia ser melhor se a gente tivesse os materiais.

very tired every day in school, taking many classes that don't have much utility (CTS, 2023, our translation²⁰).

These comments representatively reflect the perspective predominant among Chinese teachers. First, the statement “go to China to experience true Chinese culture” reflects the perception of the Chinese team regarding the Chinese culture and art subjects taught by Brazilian teachers without specialized training, which may reproduce stereotypical views of China from a Brazilian perspective. From this viewpoint, a certain mastery of the local language and cultural immersion experiences are seen as essential for a better understanding of Chinese culture. Furthermore, Chinese teachers argue that learning the Chinese language should be the students' priority at the school, as language proficiency is crucial for obtaining scholarships and continuing academic studies in China. This perspective is rooted in the experience of Chinese teachers in the Chinese education system, particularly in high school, where the focus tends to be exclusively on subjects related to university entrance exams. In this context, subjects such as Art, Music, and Physical Education are often considered “less relevant”.

However, the Former Coordinator of Confucius Institute Teachers in Brazil disagrees with this idea and stated that it was entirely a Chinese way of thinking that did not take Brazilian contexts into account. He had five years of teaching experience in Brazil and was responsible for the Chinese project at *Colégio Pedro II*, the most prestigious federal public institution in the area of foreign language education, and at *Instituto GayLussac*, one of the best private schools in Niterói/RJ. According to his experiences, due to the difficulty of learning Chinese and the limited class hours available, Brazilian schools are much more interested in the culture than in the language itself. The purpose of introducing Chinese into Brazilian basic education was more about its cultural aspects. He mentions that for many public and private schools, the creation of the Chinese subject and the presence of a Chinese teacher already makes a big difference and attracts more students to the school. However, since Chinese teachers sent by the Confucius Institute are trained in Language studies and have undergone a much stricter and more competitive educational

²⁰ In the original: 关于中国文化中国艺术的这个课时，我觉得可以减少一些，然后多把课时给中国语言中文以及他们需要参加高考的这些项目，然后让学生能够更加的集中注意力去学习这些比较重要的东西。因为每个人的时间和精力都是有限的。如果大量时间放在文化上，他是得到了精神的陶冶，但是他失去了考试的这个成绩，然后他失去了去中国参观的这个机会，就非常不值得。对巴西学生真正有用的是语言课，可以帮助他们通过HSK考试去中国体验一个真正的中国文化。还有理科的课可以让他们通过高考，考进一个理想的大学和专业。这些文化、艺术课对学生没有特别大的用处，所以每天在学校很累，但是上了很多没有太大用处的课。

path, they generally place a lot of importance on linguistic knowledge and exams, along with high expectations for students' dedication and effort. In his words:

I think this is the biggest misunderstanding in our local promotion of the Chinese language. The teachers we send here were basically language students, so they bring their own language-learning experiences to the local students. But I think this is a big misunderstanding. The goal is to understand a culture, it's not to speak the language fluently... In fact, I feel more and more now that teaching the language, or even the transmission of linguistic knowledge itself, should be less important in our international promotion of the Chinese language? (FCC, 2023, our translation²¹).

Given the difficulty that Brazilian students face in learning an Asian language, as well as the educational and social contexts in Brazil, where Chinese language teaching is still a novelty and its importance does not equate to traditionally prestigious languages like English and French, we believe it is essential to reflect on the feasibility of requiring a high level of Chinese proficiency from Brazilian students in general. Most Brazilian schools that have incorporated Chinese into their curriculum dedicate only two hours a week, which is an extremely limited amount of time to achieve fluency in an Asian language. Many face the great challenge of finding qualified professionals to teach Chinese, as there is currently only one Brazilian university, the University of São Paulo (USP)²², that offers a Chinese language program at the higher education level. In this context, learning the culture may emerge as a more accessible and compensatory goal. This approach is even more evident in public schools, which, unlike private schools and language courses, focus on expanding students' sociocultural repertoire and promoting intercultural education. Considering the beginning stage of Chinese language education in Brazilian public schools, placing greater emphasis on cultural experiences and the integration of the language with Chinese culture could be an effective strategy to make Chinese language teaching more relevant and meaningful in the lives of public school students.

Final considerations: Is it possible to teach language-culture?

²¹ In the original: 我觉得这是我们汉语的当地推广的一个最大的一个误区。就是我们就是派来的老师基本上都学语言出身的，我们就把我们自己学语言的这个经历，对，就带给了自己带给了当地的学生。但是我觉得是一个巨大的误区。本来就是就是认识一种文化，本来就是他的目的不是把这个语言说的很流利。[...] 其实我现在越来越觉得这个语言的教育，其实语言教育的本身，其实语言的本体知识的这种灌输，在我们这种汉语推广工作的这种必要性，是不是有应该有所减少？

²² According to information available on the official website of the Department of Oriental Languages at USP. Available at: <https://letrasorientais.fflch.usp.br/graduacao/chines#:~:text=A%20%C3%81rea%20de%20L%C3%ADngua%20e,d%20hist%C3%B3ria%20do%20pensamento%20chin%C3%AAs>. Accessed: 22 jul. 2024.

In the interviews conducted, we observed an excessive dichotomy between language and culture, a perspective that is also present in the curriculum of the Brazil-China Intercultural High School, where the two are treated as separate subjects. However, language and culture are always intertwined, and it is impossible to discuss one without mentioning the other (Zhang, 2021). Mendes (2012), in discussing the concept of language from a historical perspective, adopts a socio-interactionist viewpoint, considering language as a space for interaction between individuals situated socially, historically, and culturally. According to the author, language is not just an abstract communication system but a set of social and cultural codes embedded in history. In this sense, language is culture, since it is a means of identification and a system for producing meanings. Language enables us to perceive the world around us in a specific, culturally situated way. Therefore, it is crucial to integrate historical, cultural, and societal knowledge into language lessons, allowing students to experience the new language-culture.

This perspective brought new challenges for the different agents involved in implementing Chinese language and culture at the Brazil-China Intercultural High School. For the Chinese team, while maintaining a focus on language teaching, which is the specialty of the Confucius Institute teachers, addressing cultural aspects embedded in linguistic knowledge and creating a cultural environment within the school, based on their experiences from their home country, would be an interesting way to prevent culture from being lost while striving for linguistic proficiency. In this process, the language barrier presents the greatest obstacle, as most Chinese teachers speak only English. However, with the rapid development of Portuguese language teaching in China, which is currently in a phase of “massification” (Yan, 2019, p. 39, our translation²³), we believe that this linguistic difficulty could be overcome in the coming years. In addition to language skills, we emphasize the importance of providing teacher training about the educational and school organization in Brazil, which is essential for more understanding and effective teaching in a Brazilian regular public school.

For the Brazilian team, the focus on culture is often a compensatory solution for the limitations of the Brazilian context, such as the lack of Chinese language teachers and the marginal status that foreign language education holds in public schools. This highlights the importance of establishing Chinese language and culture courses at the higher education level. Without the

²³ In the original: massificação.

training of Brazilian teachers, initiatives at the elementary and high school levels can only rely on partnerships with Chinese institutions, which deeply impacts the adaptation of Chinese language teaching to the Brazilian school context and its long-term continuity.

Besides teacher training, a joint effort among teachers, administrators, and policymakers is essential to ensure the continuity of initiatives that incorporate Chinese language and culture into school curricula. At the beginning of the Brazil-China Intercultural High School, there was strong support from all involved agents. The significant investment from SEEDUC/RJ, including bonuses for teachers, guaranteed extended hours within the school for integrated planning. The curriculum was interdisciplinary and innovative, based on research and visits to China, developed through cooperation between the two countries' teams. The Confucius Institute provided significant support by sending two to three teachers each year, with exclusive dedication to the school. Upon its establishment, a large quantity of books and teaching materials was provided by the Confucius Institute. With all these favorable conditions, the Brazil-China Intercultural High School, in its early years, was able to function as a bilingual school, integrating Chinese language into all subjects and offering cultural experiences both in daily school life and through exchange programs in China. However, these conditions gradually diminished in subsequent years, and the objectives of achieving high proficiency levels and attending university in China became increasingly distant. In conclusion, the promotion of Chinese language and culture in Brazilian schools does not depend solely on the teachers involved, but more importantly, on the cooperation of agents at various levels and favorable linguistic and educational public policies from both countries.

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