

THE RACE FOR CHINA EXPERTISE

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ABSTRACT: “China expertise” has become the keyword in European foreign politics. A look at the latest government publications shows that a clear definition is yet to be expected. It can be summarized from reports about educational programs that there are differing trends among European countries as regards their Chinese language and other China-related skills as well as their infrastructures to gain these. A focus is laid on Germany, Europe’s biggest economy. A linguistic assessment shows that an early onset of acquisition is recommended for learning this distant language. Given the almost pan-European desire for China expertise, a clear definition is demanded so efficient international cooperation to build up this expertise over-regionally is possible.

KEY WORDS: *China; competence; China expertise; China strategy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The increase of hard power exerted by the People’s Republic of China (“China” hereafter) led to a shift in attitude toward the country that is now seen as “an economic competitor and a systemic rival in an increasing number of areas” (European Parliament, 2021: L1a) by many Western governments. Voices suspicious of Chinese soft power strategies were heard as early as 2006 (Paradise, 2009; Starr, 2009). German chancellor Scholz was the first European head of state to visit China after the 20th party congress, and as he was accompanied by a business delegation, there seems to be an interest in at least maintaining economic ties, if not strengthening them. At the same time, the People Daily forecasts in January that in 2023 foreign trade and foreign investment are to be stabilized (Qu, 2023). Chances are high that many businesses in Europe, particularly in its biggest economy Germany, will have some kind of relationship with Chinese partners. It is, therefore, highly advisable to gain the China expertise demanded by European governments.

This paper aims to give an overview of the status quo of China expertise in various European countries, as data are available in July of 2023, with a special focus on Europe’s biggest economy Germany and one of its stronger federal states, Bavaria. It draws on declarations of European Governments, statistical information on different related competencies, and descriptions of these by scholars from various fields, thus compiling

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data necessary for the elaboration of a China expertise strategy. Findings include remarkable differences in the availability and development of related skills between countries. Arguments from a linguistic point of view for early language education are put forward. Implications are a recommendation for strengthening Chinese as a subject from the primary level and China-related topics from the secondary level as well as more over-regional exchange. Firms, educational institutions, and political decision-makers are addressed by this interdisciplinary approach to the question of how to build up China expertise. The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section two presents definitions of China expertise. Section three summarizes the status quo of knowledge about China, whereas section four focuses on Chinese language skills. Section five points out linguistic particularities of the language before section six concludes the paper with recommendations.

2. THE (MISSING) DEFINITIONS OF CHINA EXPERTISE

China expertise has become the declared desideratum of European Governments. The German government announced in its coalition pact of 2021 to work out a comprehensive China Strategy (SPD, Green Party & FDP, 2021: 157). France demands a strategic vision on China to recalibrate its bilateral relations (French National Assembly, 2022). The UK also asks for a China strategy and China expertise (Great Britain & HM Government, 2021: 22). Yet in other countries, such as Spain, there is no concern for this on the official level. In calls for China strategies, it remains unclear who needs what kind of skills and knowledge. Most of these entities have yet to come forward with a comprehensive outline of a China Strategy, and there is no clear definition of what China Expertise comprises.

The European Parliament “calls on the EU [...] to develop a programme to finance China-related research and language training in the EU” (article 67) and “[p]oints out the need to introduce, independently from the C[ommunist] P[arty of] C[hina]’s influence, programmes for the study of Chinese culture, language and politics” (article 68) (European Parliament, 2021). The German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (FMER) does not define China expertise itself but offers a description of measures it supports to build up China expertise. Besides a database to document expertise, these include “[e]stablishing long-term structures for cooperation and networking between scientists and researchers in both countries” and “[s]upport measures for the targeted acquisition of China-related knowledge and Chinese language skills for key stakeholders at schools, universities and in science” (Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany, n.d.: section “Initiatives for the development and expansion of China expertise in Germany”). In early July, the long-awaited China Strategy was finally presented (Federal Government of Germany, 2023). Chinese language skills are mentioned before intercultural competence and knowledge about culture and civilization and other things (p. 61). In its outspoken recommendations, the French National Assembly proposes to finance the improvement of understanding of China but fails to mention language skills, except for somewhat undefined general recommendations. Although some voices ask for it (Parton, 2020), the UK government has no official position paper on its relation with

China. However, Foreign Minister Cleverly made clear that engagement with China is an obligatory part of UK policy (Cleverly, 2023). As we can see, language skills are often listed last, play a minor role in descriptions of desired China expertise, or are not mentioned.

3. THE STATUS QUO OF CHINA EXPERTISE

A 2020 report by the Expert Commission for Research and Innovation EFI of the FMER (Kooperation international, 2020) finds that language and cultural knowledge, as well as knowledge about markets, the institutional framework, and the political structure necessary for a constructive exchange with China, are scarce in Germany. The MERICS report on the topic (Stepan et al., 2018) summarizes a lack of basic language skills and a lack of basic understanding of the underlying political and power structures, knowledge of state plans, the legal framework and resources for funding. Baron and Yin-Baron even call knowledge about China in Germany „breathtakingly deficient“ (Baron & Yin-Baron, 2018: 21). This specialized knowledge can be gained at almost 30 German universities that offer Chinese Studies or sinology degree programs. The number of students of sinology is low (494 started in 2016) and in decline (Stepan & Frenzel, 2020: 245) at the 32 universities in German-speaking countries (Fachverband Chinesisch e.V., n.d.). There are approximately 1,400 cooperation programs between German and Chinese universities (German Rectors' Conference, 2022), with declining numbers. The 19 Confucius Institutes in Germany used to offer summer schools in China before the pandemic. The outcome of incentives for students of other degree programs to gain China expertise, such as a certificate upon completing an additional workload in China studies, is yet unclear (cf. University of Bayreuth, n.d. about this certificate). China-related topics are not yet a compulsory part of German schools' curriculum, (Stepan et al., 2018), but in 2020, the private Mercator Foundation and the Goethe Institute founded the Educational Network China which aims at building up China expertise at schools.

There are 19 Confucius Institutes and three Confucius Classrooms in Germany (Konfuzius-Institut an der Universität Heidelberg e.V., n.d.) where knowledge about China can be gained through workshops, exhibitions, and lectures. However, given various negative reports in the media about possible political influence, their offer suffers very limited acceptance (for the related topic of China's image in German media see Baron & Yin-Baron, 2018; Jia et al., 2021; Robak et al., 2020). Some think tanks, in part co-funded by governmental institutions, are able to offer China expertise through events that are often free, e. g. MERICS¹. Also, some chambers of commerce offer paid events directed at business people less regularly. There are also organizations on the local level: In Bavaria, e. g., a “financially independent and politically neutral organization” that call themselves an association for economy and culture in Chinese, offers talks, workshops, and events approximately every fortnight (Chinaforum Bavaria, n.d.), including special and general topics about economic and legal issues to anyone having or looking for ties

¹ <https://merics.org/en>

with China. Three more private lifelong learning companies offer China-specific training on a course finder registry in urban areas in Bavaria. The Bavarian university law allows anyone interested in courses to enroll as a guest student (Bavarian State Chancellery, 2022), similar to other federal states.

The headquarters homepage of Confucius Institutes (中国国际中文教育基金会 [China International Chinese Education Foundation], n.d.) lists 214 entities in 39 European countries, including Confucius Classrooms and other forms of representations. The UK leads the list with 34 institutes, followed by Germany (22), France (18), Italy (14) and Spain (9). Many of them are facing the reputational difficulties mentioned above. The EACT² currently provides information on France, Spain, Hungary, Belarus, and Russia from 2017, but no up-to-date numbers of universities that offer sinology. An international European cooperation about getting China expertise is yet unknown. The European Network on China ETNC³ studies EU-China relations and facilitates exchange among researchers, with participation by institutions from 19 European countries⁴. Unfortunately, there are no other figures from trustworthy sources.

Separate from China expertise, there is an infrastructure to provide Chinese language skills.

4. CHINESE IN GERMANY AND BEYOND

Chinese is slowly becoming an established subject at schools in Europe, with remarkable differences between countries. In Germany, the number of students of Chinese has been stable for years at roughly 5,000 in 2018 (Stepan et al., 2018: 10), that is of 8.4 million students at German schools (in 2021; DeStatis, 2022). Among 18 primary, 102 secondary, and 10 vocational schools, some offer Chinese as a core subject and some federal states include it optionally in graduation exams (Fachverband Chinesisch e.V., n.d.-b). Around 250 to 300 schools offer exchange programs with China, and the number of around 3,000 (teenage) students taking part in these (Frenzel & Stepan, 2019: 18) is declining (Stepan & Frenzel, 2020: 248); many exchange programs have been canceled for the long term (personal communication with secondary schools in Middle Franconia). Of the seven German universities that offer a teaching of Chinese degree program, two have a chair for this discipline. Only four federal states offer the secondary state examination after a two-year practical training granting the right to teach Chinese at schools. Eleven out of sixteen federal states have a curriculum for Chinese at secondary schools. Both the type (whether it is offered as an additional, elective or core subject) and the scope (the number of teaching periods per week and consecutive years of instruction) of Chinese language training in sinology and China studies programs vary considerably (Guder & Burckhardt, 2021; Klöter, 2016), which is also true for schools. At many universities,

² [https://www.ouhanhui.eu/#:~:text=The%20European%20Association%20of%20Chinese%20Teaching%20\(EACT\)%20is%20an%20international,to%20provide%20research%20on%20the](https://www.ouhanhui.eu/#:~:text=The%20European%20Association%20of%20Chinese%20Teaching%20(EACT)%20is%20an%20international,to%20provide%20research%20on%20the)

³ <https://etnc.info>

⁴ Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK

Chinese language training has almost wholly been outsourced to Confucius Institutes, in part due to a lack of funds for professional staff. The Educational Network China kick-off event was held in late August of 2022, including an exchange with a French education expert. There seems to be a general trend toward a decline in Chinese language skills, and a systematic over-regional educational infrastructure is not discernible.

In comparison, 46,000 students learned Chinese at over 660 public schools in 2018 in France (Guder et al., 2021: 6), including 68 primary schools (Confucius Institute France, n.d.), as the country has traditionally been at the forefront of Chinese studies in Europe (cf. Starr 2009). The UK seems to accelerate its pace of teaching Chinese with the Mandarin Excellence Programme that exceeded its goal in 2021: 6,274 students were learning Chinese at 71 schools in 2021 (Nicoletti & Culligan, n.d.); Italy is catching up even faster (Masini, 2023). More than 200 primary and secondary schools offered elective Chinese courses in Spain in 2019 (The People's Daily, 2019). According to the Confucius Institute of Barcelona (2018), one university offered a teaching of Chinese degree program supported by Hanban in the UK, France, Spain and the Netherlands respectively. Further numbers are not available. International exchange in Chinese language teaching exists to some degree, also through the European Association of Chinese Teaching, which organizes symposiums.

Generally, the importance and benefits of Chinese language skills seem to be underestimated in international business (IB). This judgement is based on various literature reviews of investigations into Chinese in IB and Business Chinese (in preparation by the author of this paper).

5. THE PARTICULAR CASE OF CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Chinese is a distant language (Guder, 2005b, 2008). Linguistically distant means that it is genetically (by its origin) and typologically (by its language type) unrelated to Indo-European languages such as English and German. Contrastive linguistic error analysis assumes that very different languages (e. g. distant languages) are relatively difficult to learn (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957). Universalist linguistic views such as the Markedness Differential Hypothesis (Eckman, 1977), the Naturalness Differential Hypothesis (Schmid, 1997), and the closely related Structural Conformity Hypothesis (Eckman, 1991), use universal language structures (preferred by all languages) as tertium comparationis, and they conclude that very different languages are likely to take more effort to learn. There are most likely more structural differences in the respective language pairs of first and target language. The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. Department of State proposes a similar definition and measure of linguistic distance used in some research considering the distance between languages. It uses a score based on learning difficulty that ranks languages according to the average time needed to reach a certain level of proficiency or the proficiency reachable in a certain amount of time (cf. U. S. Department of State, Foreign Service Institute, n.d.). There are no grounds to assume that linguistic distance causes the same level of learning difficulty in both directions: It may be easier for native

speakers of language A to learn language B than it is for native speakers of language B to learn language A, which is why the neutral tertium comparationis of universal linguistic preferences was introduced by the theories mentioned above. Suppose one language differs only slightly from universal preferences, and another shows many more diversions from these. In this case, this language pair will most likely be characterized by an imbalance in learning difficulty. The Chinese language has categories such as phonological tone and a fundamentally different writing system that need to be newly acquired by Western learners. This is why it takes native speakers of Indo-European languages longer to reach the same level of command of Chinese compared to a relatively closely related Indo-European language that shares most of the linguistic categories. Due to this structural and an additional pragmatic distance, Chinese does not fit the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). Comparable descriptors for Chinese were elaborated by experts on Chinese language teaching (Guder, 2015), and it is suggested that for adult native speakers of German more than 3,000 teaching periods are required to reach an advanced level of Chinese, corresponding to the level C2 of the CEFR; or 2,200 teaching periods for native speakers of English for professional working proficiency according to the FSI. It becomes clear from the mentioned sources that mastering Chinese is possible. Also, using digital language production resources facilitates learning Chinese and one of its most challenging aspects, the Chinese script. In a survey among 40 teachers of Chinese at German schools (Guder & Burckhardt, 2021), approximately two-thirds agreed that their students successfully reach the level A1, around half of them can guarantee the level A2. The picture becomes much more complex at B1 level, since different language skills were asked about separately (i. e., speaking, writing, and other skills, actively and passively). Given the limitations of the institutional framework for teaching Chinese, only about ten percent of the teachers agree that their students reach B2 level. The interviewees indicated between one and five teaching periods per week and between two and nine consecutive years of tuition. With 36 weeks of tuition per school year, an average of three weekly teaching periods adds up to roughly 100 periods per school year, so an advanced level could be reached after 30 years of tuition. This would be reachable within three years of intensive courses in China (cf. Guder, 2005a: 68). We can conclude from these figures that an early professionalized language education is necessary to realistically reach a sound operative level of Chinese language skills that can serve as a vantage point from which to intensify and specialize. It remains unclear if and to what extent children might learn Chinese at a faster pace since the trade-off between more plasticity in the brain among younger learners against a more cognitive learning style among older learners is not yet fully understood as regards learning a distant language (see Herschensohn, 2013, who summarizes advantages for younger learners, and results on pronunciation by Cenoz, 2005, among many studies).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Some countries like Italy and the UK are fast in developing their structures for building more China expertise, particularly linguistically. The opposite seems to be the case in Germany. Since it requires relatively more time to become fluent in Chinese, countries

are well advised to start Chinese language education at the earliest possible age. Given the close economic ties with China, Chinese language skills may serve as communicative facilitators and contribute to successful business relations. Studies show how language barriers hinder business abroad (Bilro & Cunha, 2021; cf. Harzing et al., 2011; Tenzer & Schuster, 2017). Other types of knowledge and skills are equally important to get the desired yet underdefined China expertise. Also in this regard a swift decision-making is an urgent recommendation. Introducing China-related topics at secondary school curriculums is a desirable start. Since China expertise is a strategic interest of various European countries, more international cooperation guided by clearly defined strategies to transfer knowledge about China within Europe is necessary. Initial steps were already made, the necessary networks are there, and measures could be intensified through a strong European network of think tanks and governmental institutions to create synergies.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Detailed data on the availability of Chinese language skills among European firms are scarce, and only a fractioned picture of China expertise is possible. The same is true for up-to-date figures from education. The sources were limited to trustworthy official sources such as government reports. This is why the future research agenda includes the following steps: A thorough analysis of available Chinese language skills and China-related knowledge in education as well as outside the education sector in at least one representative area, and an assessment of the repercussions of these skills and knowledge.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The sole author of this paper is head of the China Competence Center of Ansbach University of Applied Sciences.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The sole author of this paper is fully responsible for it.

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