

# **The Chinese Language and the Maritime Silk Road: Growth, Trends and Prospects**

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## **Abstract**

The concept of the Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) introduced by China covers an extensive and geographically as well as culturally diverse area. The rise of China since the 1980s has stimulated a worldwide trend in the learning of the Chinese language and the MSR is adding a new dimension to the diffusion of this language. Although the trends are clear and the possibilities for expansion immense, yet Chinese is far from being truly global in usage and there are challenges that may restrain the process of diffusion.

There are good reasons to learn Chinese and one of the most compelling is the growing economic clout of China and its pivotal role in regional affairs. The popularity of Chinese also hinges on the “soft power” of China and its potential to yield benefits comparable to those of English. Existing trends of expansion will strengthen with the creation of MSR and the continuation of China’s economic growth. Policy-wise, the setting up of Confucius Institutes and cultural exchanges must be complemented by the recognition of governments, parents, and students on the future role of Chinese. Issues related to teaching staff and teaching methods, course materials, and other difficulties should be addressed. This study examines the dissemination of Chinese in the South and Southeast Asian sectors of MSR and its development trends and future prospects.

**Key words:** The Chinese language, dissemination, Maritime Silk Road, issues and challenges

## **Introduction**

The ancient maritime Silk Road had enabled China to maintain contact with maritime countries in Asia and Africa at a time when China was a pivotal power in the world. World affairs have since become complex and relations on national, regional, and global levels have to be managed and nurtured for mutual benefit. In its search for approaches to better relations with its neighbours in Southeast and South Asia, China put forward the Twenty-first Century MSR initiative in 2013. Like the old Maritime Silk Road, it embraces an area stretching from East Asia and extends to the Middle East, East Africa, and parts of Europe. The modern MSR

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will serve more sophisticated and all-round functions. The MSR region comprises countries at different stages of economic development and wealth. At the core of the region are the countries of Southeast and South Asia.

The revival of the idea of MSR coincides with China's desire to restore its past maritime tradition. The idea has been warmly received by countries in the region as it is focused in purpose and spirit in the promotion of intra-regional relations. It is thus more than the revival of an ancient tradition but a reformulation of an idea to enhance its meaning and value as a catalyst to development, co-operation, and interaction with countries within the region. The potentials for intra-regional collaboration and exchange are unlimited and new opportunities for trade, investments, tourism and co-operation in infrastructure development, education, and cultural exchanges are immense.

The Twenty-first Century MSR is an initiative to enhance regional prosperity and co-operation. This is to be achieved through various approaches such as the promotion of trade, shipping, and basic infrastructure development such as ports, harbours, and communications networks; the stimulation of the maritime economy in resource exploitation and fisheries, tourism, and overall growth on a sustainable basis; co-operation on maritime security, climate and ecology in joint monitoring, research, enforcement, and conflict resolution; and cultural co-operation in tourism, educational exchange and training (see 刘赐贵/Liu Cigui, 2014).

The MSR initiative fits into China's strategy to build on the momentum of development in an atmosphere of peace and stability and an attempt to re-establish a maritime tradition to encourage ties with countries along the route as well as to foster economic and cultural co-operation and integration. The very concept of MSR itself is inseparable from international relations and global geopolitics. China's development hinges on a balanced focus on both overland and maritime matters so that the emphasis of one is not at the expense of the other. Hence the "Belt and Road" initiative, namely, the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, is a bold and forward-looking strategy of great significance.

The MSR will build on existing foundations to promote regional prosperity. Already in existence are several regional or sub-regional groupings in Southeast and South Asia. The largest are the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA); joint economic arrangements such as the Pan-Beibu Gulf Economic Co-operation Area; joint rail-road projects linking China and Southeast Asia; the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; and various other bilateral projects. Indeed, these development initiatives will collectively provide coherence to the making of the MSR into a mega-region. By demarcating Asia by means of a new Silk Road, the idea of MSR has effectively intensified the sense of coherence throughout the continent.

Besides the economic and political aspects, cultural matters will feature as key elements in the rationale behind the MSR initiative. Cultural co-operation are multi-dimensional and one area that offers opportunities for exchange is the learning of languages. Whereas the ancient Silk Road was a trade route for the export of Chinese silk, porcelain, and other

products, the Twenty-first Century MSR will also “export” China’s culture of which a major item is its language which is known as Mandarin. Ironically the word “Mandarin” does not exist in the Chinese language. It is the Western name for what China calls “*putonghua*” (the common language). The Chinese themselves use the term “*hanyu*” (汉语) or “*zhongwen/huayu*” (中文/华语). The latter terms are the standard expressions used by the Chinese overseas.

It is still too early to say how the MSR initiative will affect the popularity of Chinese. Measures that promote the economic prosperity of China and the MSR region will almost certainly enhance cultural understanding and exchanges including the study of languages. The existence of the MSR is meaningful only if the common people are the ultimate beneficiaries. One of the benefits for the people is the opportunity to learn the major languages of the region. In this context, learning Chinese is particularly meaningful as it is the principal language of the region. It is in this context too that the focus of this study is placed.

Increasingly, the growing appeal of Chinese has become a global phenomenon. The general optimism over the prospects of China is more realistic to those who know the Chinese language. The trend in learning Chinese is already evident in the MSR region, as it gradually emerges as a foreign language of choice among the business community and the young.<sup>1</sup> The spread of Chinese will be better attained through the teaching of Chinese (华文教学) rather than Chinese education *per se* (华文教育). This paper focuses attention on the trend of promoting Chinese in Southeast and South Asia. It will examine the state of the learning of Chinese in the MSR region, its role and prospects for diffusion as well as issues and challenges that may arise.

### **The Growth and Appeal of Languages: The Case of English**

Of the thousands of languages in the world, only a few have grown and developed from their local dialect origins into major media of communication. The majority remains largely localized within their traditional domains, sometimes straddling two or more nation-states, some manage to survive and others even fading or disappearing from the linguistic map. The rise and fall of languages are determined by many factors. Putting aside the phenomenon of declining or eventual extinction of languages, one may speculate on the factors involved in the rise to prominence and domination of others to become regional or global languages. These factors may be considered in their historical and contemporary perspectives.

Historically the rise of some languages to prominence is a phenomenon dating back to the advent of Western colonialism. The historical pattern of expansion of languages, almost exclusively European ones such as English, Spanish, French and Portugal, was characterized by an interplay of hard and soft power. The hard power components were the introduction of colonial rule over the entire “New World” and wide swathes of Asia and Africa and the imposition of imperialist languages in the administration and control over subjected peoples and territories. Hegemony over colonial territories enabled the languages of Western powers to monopolize the political, economic, social, and diplomatic spaces over extended periods of

time and in the process forcing colonial societies to learn and communicate in the languages of their masters. At the latter part of the colonial period lasting until well into the post-independence era, the soft power components of dominant European languages, especially English, consolidated their appeal and acceptance. Some of these languages have become the symbols of higher education and scientific research, cultural sophistication, entertainment, and the mass media.

The contemporary perspective in the rise of languages pertains especially to the learning of Japanese, Korean and Chinese. In all cases, the association with rapidly impressive economic performance of East Asia is inescapable. The absence of positive influence arising from direct political or military control is also conspicuous. Instead, the motivations to learn, especially in the case of the Chinese language, are driven by personal interest to improve career prospects or economic returns from the growing inflows of Chinese tourists and their shopping habits. Again, behind the rising interest in learning Chinese are the diffusion of government-to-government channels of language instruction such as Confucius Institutes in various parts of the world and the spontaneous drive to learn Chinese among Chinese and other communities overseas.

### **English in the MSR Region**

MSR member countries in South and Southeast were largely under British colonial rule from the nineteenth century until after World War Two. In Southeast Asia, British rule extended from Myanmar (formerly Burma), through Malaya and Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei, and North Borneo, as was the whole of South Asia. In the Philippines, the Spaniards were replaced by the Americans as colonial masters from 1898 until 1946. The English language is therefore well-entrenched in the education systems of these countries up to today. English has become an important medium of instruction in many schools, colleges and universities and large sections of the people are able to speak English. Thousands of students from South and Southeast Asia have and still are studying in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States.

Today, Chinese is spoken by an estimated 1,100 million people in the world (Chen, 2010: 198) and English by 750 million. While Chinese is spoken mainly by native speakers in China and a section of the Chinese overseas, English is spoken by more non-native rather than native speakers especially in Asia. How and why English has become the principal international language worldwide as well as in the MSR region is due to three major factors.

The first is historical and inseparable from colonialism and empire building. British political rule had allowed English to take root in all its colonies and protected territories. European empire building reached its apogee in the nineteenth century and the most powerful of all, the British, ruled over a fifth of the world's land area in an empire where the sun never set (Gooden, 2009: 169; Piercy, 2012). With political control, the British set about promoting the English language through the education system and Christian missions. As the language of administration and higher education, English became "the language of aspiration" (Gooden,



2009: 171). Although China's maritime activities in Asia occurred centuries before those of the West, it left behind little linguistic influence in the continent. This was because imperial China never harboured any intention to propagate its language abroad among non-Chinese populations. The contrasting international status of English and Chinese confirms the truth that it was political control then rather than being early that mattered.

The British empire gave birth to the Anglo-Saxon or English-speaking countries of the United States, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The emergence of America as a global power since the end of World War Two has a powerful catalytic impact on the spread the English language throughout the world.

The next factor is economic. The great advantage of English is that it is the language of the Americans. The global power of America has helped to transform English as the *de facto* language of the world. The increasing internationalization of rules and standards and the globalization of economic production have been accompanied by the use of English in many areas of human endeavour. These include international diplomacy, the sciences, commerce and trade, finance and banking, telecommunications, and transport by air, land and water. Apart from the Anglo-Saxon countries, English is the language of the mainstream societies of South Africa and Singapore, an official or semi-official language of Nigeria, India, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and other countries. In India, the English-speaking population is larger than the entire population of England (Gooden, 2009). The international acceptance of English is such that out of the 750 million who speak the language, half are non-native speakers (McCrum *et al.*, 2011: 9).

The third factor is cultural. The Anglo-Saxon countries, but especially America, exert a global influence on modern popular culture and other "soft power" attributes. Through education, film and television, electronic networks, mass media, music, sports, cuisine (fast food and franchising), fashion and many more, English has entrenched itself as a truly international language. It is also the major official language of international law, the Olympics, and diplomatic relations. With these "push" factors, the English language has spread throughout the world with almost effortless ease.

Lastly, globalization has spread English to areas beyond the borders of the former British Empire. This is especially so in China, where the world's largest population and several decades of high rates of unabated economic growth have stimulated the widespread learning of English. It is reported that the number of people learning English in China exceeds the combined population of England and America (Saraceni, 2015: 3). The learning of English has also spread to South Korea, Southeast Asia, and African countries. In Europe, 2006 data from the British Council show that 80 per cent of the people in the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden were proficient in English, 60 per cent in Finland, 50 per cent in Germany, 30 per cent in France and Italy, and 20 per cent in Spain and Turkey (Hitchings, 2011: 309).

Although colonial control and empire building are relics of the past, economic might and "soft power" still matter a great deal today. Increasingly, new scenarios are unfolding in the

twenty-first century indicating positive signs for the learning and spread of Chinese. Although Chinese has yet to compete with English as a foreign language of choice, its overall appeal is undoubtedly becoming stronger than many other languages.

### **The Chinese Language in the MSR Region to the 1980s**

Comprising 15 countries in all, Southeast and South Asia occupy a big swathe of the MSR region. Southeast Asia has the largest concentration of ethnic Chinese outside China but South Asia has hardly any. Chinese is the mother tongue of the Chinese communities but a totally alien language to the indigenous populations.

#### **Chinese Education in Southeast Asia: A Chinese Community Enterprise**

Chinese education in Southeast Asia has a history spanning 200 years or so<sup>2</sup> but it is basically a Chinese community enterprise. The idea of promoting Chinese among the indigenous communities hardly ever surfaced.

Chinese education in Southeast Asia has undergone a history of suppression during the colonial period that has persisted until recent years. The history of Chinese education in this region has followed three patterns of development as represented by the experiences of the Chinese communities in Malaysia, Singapore, and the rest of Southeast Asia.

Chinese education in Malaysia is the most advanced and comprehensive outside China/Taiwan/Hong Kong, and Chinese is taught up to the university level. Malaysia has 1,294 Chinese primary schools and 61 private secondary schools. Another 78 former Chinese secondary schools have been converted to become national schools in which Chinese is taught as a subject. At the tertiary level, there are three Chinese community-funded colleges (of which one has been upgraded as a university college), each with a department of Chinese Studies and conducts some other courses in Chinese. A private and two public universities also offer degree courses in Chinese Studies and/or Chinese language.

The Malaysia model is unique and cannot reasonably be duplicated anywhere else. Chinese is recognized as the mother tongue of the Chinese community and the right to learn the language is guaranteed by the Constitution. Chinese education in the country today represents the fruits of years of unremitting efforts and immense investment of resources by the Chinese community. However, the urge to learn Chinese is largely confined to the Chinese though non-Chinese number about 60,000 or 10 per cent of the enrollment in Chinese primary schools.

Singapore was once the centre of Chinese education in Southeast Asia and the site of Nanyang University, the first and only Chinese-language university outside China. After Singapore's independence in 1965, Chinese schools were phased out as English was confirmed as the medium of instruction in the education system. Nanyang University was abolished in 1980 after a brief existence of 25 years. Chinese students now learn Chinese as a mother

language taken as a compulsory subject. At the tertiary level, Chinese is taught as a second language.

The rest of Southeast Asia offers yet another pattern of development in the teaching of Chinese. Again organized as a community project and targeting the Chinese communities, Chinese education suffered a fate of protracted suppression in every country and treated with decided disfavour before China's rise in the 1980s. Laws were introduced to control and regulate, even to prohibit, its existence (see 蔡昌卓/Cai Changzhuo, 2010). Today the majority of young ethnic Chinese in these countries are largely illiterate in Chinese.

Thailand in 1918 banned attempts to imitate the education system of China and Chinese schools were closed during World War Two. Although these schools were restored after the war, their development was subjected to the prevailing political climate both within and outside Thailand (蔡巧娟/Cai Qiaojuan, 2006: 22-29). Indonesia had boasted 1,800 Chinese schools with 430,000 students before independence. Its post-independence policy was one of strict control over these schools. In 1958, Chinese schools were prohibited from accepting new students and their number fell to 510 with 125,000 students. Chinese education endured its darkest period of history during the Suharto period between 1966 and 1989. The policy of assimilating the Chinese led to the closure of Chinese schools and the Chinese press, the import of Chinese publications was banned, and the celebration of Chinese festivals prohibited (徐煜权/Xu Yuquan, 2008; 黄昆章/Huang Kunzhang, 2009). The same fate awaited Chinese education in the Philippines when, in 1973, 150 Chinese schools were phased out. Chinese schools which continued to exist disguised themselves as "former Chinese schools" and were permitted to teach two hours of Chinese per day (Palanca, 2004). In Cambodia, 250 Chinese schools with 150,000 students were closed in 1970 (Mark, 2000). In 1956-1967, South Vietnam decreed that all Chinese schools be closed and be converted into Vietnamese schools. Nevertheless, the Chinese community still managed to operate some of these schools. There were 141 such schools in the Saigon-Cholon area alone in 1975. Unification in the same year saw the introduction of new restrictive policies. In 1982, Chinese schools were open to Vietnamese students and a limited amount of time was allowed for the teaching of Chinese but were eventually closed, nationalized or combined with Vietnamese schools. New Chinese schools or the private teaching of Chinese were banned (蔡昌卓/Cai Changzhuo, 2010: 369-370). Chinese schools had also seen better days in Myanmar before World War Two. Just prior to Japanese invasion in 1942, there were 300 Chinese "dialect-based" schools in the country with an enrollment of 20,000. Their brief revival after the war was short-lived. The Ne Win government's nationalization policy in 1963 was the last straw that led to the death of Chinese schools in the country (蔡昌卓/Cai Changzhuo, 2010: 196-197).

### **Revival of Chinese: Birth of A New Era?**

There is a visible trend to teach Chinese as a foreign language in the MSR region. The practical approach to the propagation of language is through the teaching of Chinese (华文教

学) as distinct from Chinese education (华文教育) in which instruction in all non-language subjects is conducted in Chinese. Chinese education is to transmit not just the language but culture whereas the teaching of Chinese is to treat the language as a second or third language in schools or universities.

The situation in South Asia, where the English language is deeply rooted in their education systems, is entirely different from that in Southeast Asia. The region's links with China have hitherto been diplomatic and devoid of linguistic emphasis. Until very recently, the region's total trade with China was negligible and its interest in Chinese was minimal.

### **The Rising Popularity of Chinese**

Conditions for learning Chinese have changed radically since the emergence of the Chinese economy from the 1980s. Many countries and their inhabitants are re-assessing the relevance of the Chinese language as students, schools, and families become more aware of the need to learn Chinese. Many countries are adopting policies to take advantage of new opportunities that knowledge and proficiency in Chinese offer. China is also taking a proactive approach to sponsor basic infrastructure for the teaching of Chinese. When certain universities in Europe first showed an interest in China in the past, they started academic courses on Sinology or the study of China and its history and culture. The current trend, however, is the taking up of Chinese at the school and community levels. The reasons behind this phenomenon are the growing economic appeal of the language and the cultural or “soft” power of China. These are the main forces that will push the boundaries of Chinese beyond China.

### **Economic Power**

The immediate impetus to the learning of Chinese is economic. This is directly linked to the rapid development of China and its growing wealth in a changing global economic order. In his book *China versus The West*, Tselichtchev (2012: 210) advised:

Make China part of your world. Even if it does not lead to a good business opportunity, you will gain knowledge and experience that may help you a great deal to live and work in today's new world. And if our opportunity works out really well, you will join the ranks of Western beneficiaries of China's growth.

Tselichtchev (2012: 209) is positive that the configuration of a new world that is not West-centered is taking shape. At the forefront of the new dynamism is China. He foresees that a rapidly growing China means new opportunities and to take advantage of them as well as to appreciate the challenges better, he advocates the need to learn much more about China. He suggests that:

Schools and universities in America, Europe, and Japan must offer more Chinese language courses as well as courses on the Chinese history, culture, economy, and politics. Business schools have to teach Chinese business. There should be many more translations of Chinese books... All this can provide impetus for many more people to discover their China opportunities.

One opinion goes so far as to say that in the twenty-first century, “China is no longer an elective course, it’s core curriculum” (*Language Magazine*, November 2014a). In 2006, an estimated 30 million people worldwide were learning Chinese, and projected to reach 100 million by 2010 (Erard, 2006).

Many realize that learning the language is no longer a “trend” but an investment for the future. From being a famously poor country just 35 years ago, China has emerged with amazing speed to become the second largest economy of the world. In 1990, the GDP of China of USD0.39 trillion was only a fraction of the US total of USD5.801 trillion.<sup>3</sup> By 2012, China’s GDP of USD7.744 trillion is half that of the US figure of USD15.495 trillion (*World Economic Outlook*, 2011). If the Chinese economy continues to grow three times faster than the advanced countries, China will become the world’s largest economy within the next 30 years. The global shift in wealth has given rise to uneasiness and tensions in many quarters. In the context of globalization and increasing interdependence, it is recognized that both China and other countries need to understand each other’s cultures. There is also a need to foster and to cultivate good relationships among the young and society in general, and among business and political elites.

The urge to learn Chinese, as in learning Japanese or Korea, is largely motivated by its prospects as a means to advance one’s career rather than out of the love for the culture of China. This will remain as the decisive determining factor in learning Chinese, as long as the “economic” value of the language is sustained. If Chinese declines in importance and relevance, it will almost certainly lose its appeal. American Nobel winner in economics Robert Fogel wrote in 2010 that, by 2040, China’s GDP will reach USD123 trillion. By then it will become a rich country with a per capita GDP of USD85,000. China would then account for 40 per cent of the world’s GDP, while those of America and Europe would be 14 and 5 per cent respectively (Fogel, 2010). This forecast has been criticized as over-optimistic (see Chang, 2010). Nevertheless, the fact that cannot be ignored is that, as the world’s most populous country with a huge market, China is a gigantic trade partner and a major source of tourists, migrants, and investment. Increased Chinese economic presence in the MSR region through trade, investments, tourism and greater cultural exchanges through scholarships, education, people-to-people programmes and co-operation will widen the exposure of Chinese to a larger sector of the international society.

The learning of Chinese in Southeast Asia is currently enjoying a favourable phase of development. The rise of China has compelled a change of attitude towards Chinese. Changes in internal political circumstances have also helped to broaden access to the learning of the language. While the local Chinese communities are taking full advantage of the opportunities to learn the language, signs of the indigenous communities taking up the language are also emerging.

In Malaysia, despite tight controls on the setting up of new Chinese schools, a primary education in Chinese among the Chinese community has become a matter of necessity.<sup>4</sup> The demand for admission to Chinese schools in major cities, especially around Kuala Lumpur, far exceeds the places available. Some of the private Chinese secondary schools too have to reject an increasing number of applications for admission each year.

In Thailand, establishing diplomatic relations with China in 1975 encouraged a renewed interest in Chinese (Theraphan, 2007: 190). Control over Chinese education was relaxed in 1992. New Chinese schools are now approved, the language may be taught from kindergarten to grade six in primary schools, and is often offered as an optional subject in secondary schools. Chinese tuition classes are now permitted and the first Chinese university with teaching staff from China has been established. Many night schools, tuition and training centres have also appeared. Primary and secondary schools, international schools, colleges of commerce and tertiary education institutions are beginning to offer Chinese lessons (蔡巧娟/Cai Qiaojuan, 2006: 29-30). By 2009, 1,610 schools were offering Chinese lessons, and the language was made one of the subjects in post-secondary examinations. In 2009, as many as 10,000 candidates took the test for Chinese language (网易新闻, 2009).

The revival of Chinese education in Indonesia was made possible by the downfall of the Suharto regime in 1999. Chinese education was incorporated into the national education system, and support was granted in the forms of allocations, teaching personnel, and premises (徐煜权/Xu Yuquan, 2008; 黄昆章/Huang Kunzhang, 2009). An unofficial estimate in 2008 indicated that about 2 million students and adults were learning Chinese. Learning now takes various forms such in foreign language classes in primary and secondary schools, tuition classes organized by Chinese clan associations, private tuition centres, or studying at home. The Chinese communities in Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung and Medan have also set up colleges to help train teaching staff (徐煜权/Xu Yuquan, 2008). Learning Chinese is building up a strong momentum in Indonesia. Some universities, colleges and private tuition centres have considerable numbers of indigenous students (林友顺/Lim Yew Soon and 余歌沧/Yu Ge Cang, 2010).

In the Philippines, Chinese language lessons sponsored by the Chinese community are now available in public schools. In 2011, the Ministry of Education conducted a weekly programme of four hours of Chinese classes in five selected secondary schools in a change of policy with long-term implications (黄端铭/Huang Duanming, 2011: 25). In Cambodia, Chinese schools were re-opened in 1990. By 2000, 70 Chinese schools had appeared with a combined



enrollment of 40,000 to 50,000 students (Mark, 2000). Chinese will also be taught in universities (*The Phnom Penh Post*, 12 June 2008). In Brunei, Malay students are beginning to take up Chinese lessons. In a Chinese school in the capital with 3,250 students from kindergarten to Grade 11, one out of five were Malay students in 2011 (*The Sunday Star*, 15 January 2012).

Interests in Chinese are beginning to stir in South Asia. The response is most active in Pakistan and is building up momentum in India. Pakistan is encouraging the trend of learning the Chinese language and culture in Pakistani schools and colleges so as to produce a new generation of citizens armed with the skills to deal with the “rising dragon” more productively. The country will also increase interactions between media personnel, think tanks, and academic institutes, and other exchanges including TV dramas (*Language Magazine*, November 2014b). The Sindh province, with a population of 55 million, had planned to use the direct approach of making Chinese language compulsory to all students from Class VI (ages 10-11) from 2013 (*The Express Tribune*, 5 September 2011; *ICEF Monitor*, 17 September 2012). There was also a plan to make all public universities in Pakistan to offer Chinese language courses via video conferencing in 2014 (*ICEF Monitor*, 17 September 2012).

The learning of Chinese in India is led by businessmen who see the commercial value of the language. Rapidly increasing two-way trade since 2000 has turned China into India’s largest trading partner.<sup>5</sup> The discerning businessmen realize that the first step in profiting from this trend is the learning of the language. In a bold policy shift in education, India announced in 2010 its plan to add Chinese in the syllabus of state schools to allow 11-year old students an option to learn the language from April 2011 (Stancati, 15 December 2010). By 2013, interest in learning Chinese has increased significantly especially in the major cities. Mumbai has more than 25 Chinese-teaching centres and the New Delhi area has 120 (Jetley, 23 May 2013). In 2012, China pledged to train 300 Indian language teachers to serve in more than 100 secondary schools (*ICEF Monitor*, 17 September 2012).

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are obviously lagging behind in attempts to learn Chinese. Their ties with China are primarily economic and strategic. China is their principal source of foreign investments and a source of aid and collaborative partner in the development of basic infrastructure but the learning of Chinese has yet to take off.<sup>6</sup>

## Soft Power

The “soft power” of a nation is its ability to attract and persuade, in contrast to “hard power” which is the ability to coerce through military and economic might. Soft power ensues from a nation’s “attractiveness of its culture, political ideals, and policies” (Nye, 2004). Culture, together with its language, functions as the “soft” and humanistic side of a nation and its people. Its significance is to win appreciation, trust and friendship in the management of image change (Hsiao and Yang, 2009).

The English language, the nearest to being a global *lingua franca* and the native tongue of the Americans and British, and representing most of what Anglo-Saxon and Western cultures



stand for, is associated with the most pervasive soft power on earth. Globalization and other processes have continued to extend the cultural influence and values of the West throughout the world. Despite its ancient civilization and rich cultural heritage, China's soft power has yet to match that of the West. The diffusion of Chinese culture through the arts and performances, mass media, tourism, education and language programmes and many others to different parts of the world has contributed much to raise the level of China's soft power.

The motivation to learn Chinese is primarily fueled by the rising economic value of the language. Cultural appeal or soft power provides an added dimension to the drive to learn a language. At the present stage of development of the teaching of Chinese, China's soft power and the spread of Chinese are mutually reinforcing. While the Confucius Institutes (CIs) is a symbol of China's soft power and the vanguard of spearheading the teaching of Chinese, the language itself will also contribute to the construction of soft power.

The CI is the basic model, and primarily affiliated with a university, by which to teach Chinese in foreign countries. In the schools, this function is taken over by Confucius Classrooms (CCs). The first CI was established in South Korea in 2004. In 2009, 263 CIs have appeared in 86 countries and 272 CCs in 28. By October 2014, there were 471 CIs in 199 countries. The relatively low-cost CC that is easily organized has spread even more rapidly and widely, the number reaching 730 in 54 countries. A distinctive feature in the distribution of CIs and CCs is the prominence of America and Europe. Together they account for 66 per cent of the CIs in the world and 83 per cent of the CCs, in a clear sign that America and Europe are showing a sense of urgency in learning Chinese. On the other hand, Asia accounts for 22 per cent of the CIs and only 8 per cent of the CCs. The take-up rate in Southeast and South Asia is low, accounting for about 7 per cent of the CIs a mere 3 per cent of the CCs (Table 1). Again, it is South Korea and Japan, among the most advanced economies in Asia, that are more keenly aware of the need to learn Chinese. Together they account for 31 per cent of Asia's CIs (孔子学院总部, 国家汉办/Confucius Institutes Head Office and National Hanban Office, 2014).

Table 1. Distribution of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms, 2009 and 2014

Region	2009		2009		2014		2014	
	No. of Country/ Territory	No. of CI	No. of Country/ Territory	No. of CC	No. of Country/ Territory	No. of CI	No. of Country/ Territory	No. of CC
Oceania	2	10	1	2	3	17	3	59
Africa	15	21	4	4	29	42	8	11
Americas	11	87	6	205	17	152	7	424
Europe	28	70	7	34	38	158	22	178
Asia	30	75	10	27	32	102	14	58
Total	86	263	28	272	119	471	54	730

Source: 孔子学院总部, 国家汉办/Confucius Institutes Head Office and National Hanban Office, 2014

The Head Office of CIs envisages 1,000 CIs in the world by 2020 and the number of non-Chinese learning Chinese could have reached 100 million in 2010 (Zhao and Huang, 2010). It is reported that 400 universities from 76 countries are applying to set up CIs. In 2009, CIs provided Chinese language instruction in 9,000 course programmes and facilitated more than 7,500 cultural exchange activities involving at least 3 million participants (Confucius Institute Online n.d., in Auethavornpipat, 2014).

### **Issues and Challenges**

Interests in Chinese as a second language of choice are gathering pace in South and Southeast Asia and the introduction of MSR will boost conditions for learning the language arising from the strengthening of regional ties. The current situation in which China is playing a pivotal role in the world economy is a historic moment that offers unexcelled opportunities for the promotion of Chinese. Globalization has tightened economic linkages among countries to a point where they have to swim or sink together. China follows a policy of peaceful, friendly and harmonious relations with all countries and actively promotes cultural and commercial exchanges. These are positive conditions that will help to elevate the appeal and competitiveness of the Chinese language in the future.

Before World War Two, many did not expect to see English emerging as a widely used international language. But the British Empire at its height had occupied a fifth of the world's land area. While China today is home to a quarter of the world's population, Chinese has never been widely spoken outside China. The language and its various dialects of China are spoken by the Chinese overseas and serves as one of the official languages of Singapore. In Asia, three possible scenarios may emerge, namely, that English will continue to dominate, that Chinese will become a regional language, and that no language will dominate as a "common language" (Starr, 2009). Buoyed by the growing sense of regional identity via the MSR, and aided by the resources at its command today, China is well prepared to optimize the current historic moment for the promotion of Chinese.

Despite the strong shifts towards the learning of Chinese in many countries, the transmission of the language still faces many problems and challenges. To be meaningful, the learning of Chinese should not to be confined to the Chinese overseas but, more importantly, to the non-Chinese. It is only by reaching target groups beyond the Chinese communities that will promote the greater use of Chinese as a language of relevance in the twenty-first century.

Learning a foreign language is a personal matter. The motivation is either to use it as a "tool" or to allow the person to understand the culture and history of the native speakers (Littlewood, 2008: 57; VanPattern and Benati, 2010: 111). The appeal of Chinese as a second or third language is primarily its role as a tool for career advancement. The belief in China's continued favourable growth rate in the foreseeable future will enable the trend towards

learning Chinese to gather momentum. This belief will prevent the learning of Chinese to meet the same fate as Japanese when it loses its appeal as the Japanese economy loses its momentum (Dillion, 2010).

The challenges facing the future of Chinese as a foreign language are then concerned with issues that face its growth rather with its decline or stagnation. These may be identified as the entrenched position of English; issues connected with teaching staff and teaching materials, and psychological barriers. Cultural barriers as well as issues of politics and ideology are also sources of concern.

### **The Entrenched Position of English**

The dominance of English worldwide has been a fact since the end of World War Two. Its historical head-start has enabled it to be strongly entrenched in the education systems of many countries. In the MSR region, English is the language of many families especially in former British colonial territories. In Singapore, 10 per cent of Chinese families spoke English at home in 1980; by 2011, this proportion was 60 per cent (Seah, 2012). Anglo-Saxon countries continue to attract large numbers of foreign students to their shores. In 2014, these countries played host to 1.58 million foreign students, or 17.8 times the number in China. At the same time, China sent out 694,365 students abroad, of whom 412,437 or 59.4 per cent were in the five Anglo-Saxon countries (Table 2).

Table 2. Foreign Students in Anglo-Saxon Countries and China, 2014

Country	Foreign Students	Students Abroad
Australia	249,588	87,497
Canada	120,960	26,238
New Zealand	40,995	11,337
United Kingdom	427,686	76,913
United States	740,482	210,452
China	88,979	694,365

Source: Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students

(<http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>, 5 May 2014)

The Anglo-Saxon countries are also the major destinations for students from South and Southeast Asia. In 2014, as many as 196,102 South Asian and 140,442 Southeast Asian students were studying in these countries (Table 3). In contrast, China's foreign students numbered only 88,979, including those from countries of the MSR region.

Table 3. South and Southeast Asian Students in Anglo-Saxon Countries, 2014

South and SE Asia	USA	UK	Canada	Australia	New Zealand	Total
Brunei	67	2,275	12	579	76	3,009
Cambodia	323	63	39	462	72	959
Indonesia	6,907	1,442	612	9,431	372	18,764
Laos	42	11	9	180	31	273
Malaysia	6,531	12,822	927	17,001	1,945	39,226
Myanmar	782	295	27	641	30	1,775
Philippines	3,094	1,306	303	2,374	429	7,506
Singapore	4,363	5,253	312	9,379	240	19,547
Thailand	7,386	6,098	378	3,282	457	17,601
Vietnam	15,083	3,769	792	11,081	1,057	31,782
Sub-Total						140,442
Bangladesh	3,210	3,816	1,332	3,339	117	11,814
India	97,120	29,713	8,142	11,684	7,248	153,907
Pakistan	4,455	8,784	1,929	3,762	286	19,216
Sri Lanka	2,811	3,516	366	3,423	628	10,744
Maldives	28	134	9	208	42	421
Sub-Total						196,102

Source: Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students, <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>, 5 May 2014

In 2012, China hosted 328,340 foreign students who came from about 200 countries and regions of whom 207,555 came from Asia (Table 4). This number represents an increase of 35,719 or 12.2 per cent over the figure for 2011. Among the 15 countries with the largest number of students in China, eleven are Asian, and ten are from East, Southeast and South Asia. By far the largest contingent was from South Korea with 63,488 students. Other Asian countries were Japan (21,126), Thailand (16,675), Indonesia (13,144), Vietnam (13,038), India (10,237), Pakistan (9,630), Kazakhstan (9,565), Mongolia (8,210), Malaysia (6,045) and Singapore (4,250) (Jiangsu Education, 2013).

Table 4. Foreign Students in China, 2012

Continent	Total Number	Percentage	Increase/Decrease over 2011	Increase/Decrease (%)
Asia	207,555	63.2	19,684	10.5
Europe	54,453	16.6	7,182	15.2
America	34,882	10.6	2,549	7.9
Africa	27,062	8.2	6,308	30.4
Oceania	4,388	1.3	-4	-0.1
Total	328,340	99.9	35,719	-

Source: Jiangsu Education 29 March 2013, Statistical Report for Foreign Students in China in 2012, <http://www.admissions.cn/news/364282.shtml>

To many students, the choice of a second language is English rather than Chinese. However, for those who already know English, adding Chinese as a third language will be an attractive investment for a brighter future. South and Southeast Asia have been slow in accepting facilities offered by CIs and CCs. Other than Thailand, the take-up rate is low compared with countries in other parts of the world (Table 5).

Table 5. Distribution of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms, Southeast and South Asia, 2014

Country	Confucius Institutes	Confucius Classrooms
Brunei	0	0
Cambodia	1	3
Indonesia	6	0
Laos	1	0
Malaysia	2	0
Myanmar	0	3
Philippines	3	0
Singapore	1	2
Thailand	12	11
Vietnam	1	0
Sub-Total	27	19
Bangladesh	1	1
India	2	0
Pakistan	2	0
Sri Lanka	1	1
Sub-Total	6	2
Total	33	21

Source: 孔子学院总部，国家汉办/Confucius Institutes Head Office and National Hanban Office, 2014

### Teaching Staff and Materials

At the practical level, pedagogic issues remain as a major stumbling block to the spread of Chinese. The main problems arise from the shortage of teaching staff, teaching materials, and psychological barriers in learning the language.

A language programme is as good as the teachers who put it into practice. Mounting demand for Chinese courses has created a worldwide bottleneck in the supply of teachers. The teaching personnel should not only be qualified but also in sufficient number and familiar with the culture of the learners. The simultaneous appearance of many “hot spots” in the learning of Chinese in many countries has imposed heavy strains on properly trained staff. The demands for teachers are not just confined to CIs and CCs, but also in community-run language centres.

In the MSR region, the shortage of teachers is likely to remain for sometime. Even in Malaysia where Chinese education has been in uninterrupted existence for decades, the shortage of teachers has been a perpetual problem. In 1968, there was a shortfall of 1,172 teachers in the Chinese primary schools. By 2012, this shortage has doubled to 2,337. As these schools are a component of the national education system, the source of this problem is traceable to the lack of official planning in teacher training (《东方日报》/*Oriental Daily*, 25 March 2012). Indonesia's most urgent problem is the lack of teaching staff. The learning of Chinese that was prohibited for 30 years has been the main cause of the problem. The country can only rely on teachers who are already in their sixties. If all the schools in Indonesia were to offer Chinese lessons, the country would require up to 80,000 teachers (黄昆章/Huang Kunzhang, 2009; 林友顺/Lim Yew Soon and 余歌沧/Yu Ge Cang, 2010). In Thailand where the potential "market" for Chinese language is huge, the demand for qualified teachers is immense. Yet in 390 public schools where Chinese is taught, only 30 per cent of the teachers have received proper language training (Ronnaphol, not dated). This issue is repeated in almost all other countries that are keen to expand the teaching of Chinese and will remain as the greatest constraint on the pace of expansion of Chinese.

The shortage of teachers is aggravated by the lack of suitable teaching materials. The background of the learners ranging from children to adults would call for separate texts of appropriate contents and levels that are systematically structured to suit different needs. Contents that are overwhelmingly China-oriented may not work as well as one with a judicious mix of China-oriented and local elements. As Thailand attempts to produce such textbooks, it would require teachers who are culturally familiar with Thailand as well as China (Ronnaphol, not dated). The most effective language course is one that stimulates the interest of the learners. In Australia, a study suggests that the quality of teaching may be improved by providing pre-service and in-service training to teachers and by improving student contact with Chinese to a more creative and practical level (Orton, 2008).

### **Psychological Barriers**

Learning a language is best undertaken without psychological and other barriers. Language teaching is an exercise in motivation which is in itself a complex psychological phenomenon. While the Chinese overseas may be motivated to learn Chinese to reclaim their cultural identity, non-Chinese do so primarily for utilitarian purposes. Even so, the learning environment should be sufficiently conducive to minimize any barriers to learning. It is found that children from families which speak English face a psychological disadvantage when learning another foreign language. Way back in 1899, Lim Boon Keng noticed that an obstacle to the study of Chinese was that many Chinese families had stopped using the language for years and even generations (Lim, 1899: 104).

Where Chinese is not widely spoken, the conditions for learning the language may remain unfavourable. This is the case in Southeast Asia where many Chinese speak little or no Chinese

at all. In Australia, a study confirms that among 84,000 students who learn Chinese in schools, 94 per cent had given up by Grade 11, so that by Grade 12, there were only 4,534 left (Orton, 2008). The study attributes this to three factors. The first is that the majority of the students who sign up for Chinese lessons were Chinese. In Grade 12, nine out of ten of these students were from Chinese-speaking families. Other students consequently feel a distinctive psychological fear and disadvantage. The second is the difficulty of the language and improper teaching methods. Australian students need to recognize 500 Chinese characters by Grade 12, yet only 500 hours are allocated for Chinese classes (see Moser, 2010). The last factor is the lack of a proper atmosphere in the family and community for the learning of Chinese. This is because the schools, families and community do not sufficiently realize the value of Chinese and they feel that it is difficult to acquire proficiency in the language. To change the situation, the study recommends that students be divided into two groups among those for whom Chinese is spoken at home and where it is treated as a second language (Orton, 2008).

### **Political and Ideological**

While the teaching of Chinese is widely accepted, the CIs have not always been received favourably in some quarters. The spread of CIs and their operation have often been dogged by political and ideological controversies. Certain opinions in the West believe that CIs may engage in commercial and military espionage or spread communist propaganda (see Starr, 2009; Welch, 2011). Some stress that Chinese is the language of only one country and dismiss the possibility of its use by foreigners, or that the Chinese government is behind the move to promote the language (Kaufmann, not dated). Many see the CIs as a means by which China is pushing to expand its soft power and its hegemony. Many other criticisms of CIs have also surfaced (see Wikipedia, November 2014).

In the Asian sectors of the MSR, the setting up of CIs has met with indifference in countries such as India and Vietnam. India was initially against the expansion of foreign university participation and viewed the CI as China's attempt to extend its soft power. The two first attempts to set up CIs in its universities were aborted (*ICEF Monitor*, 2012). The decision to set up the first CI in Hanoi University in 2013 was followed by fears from some that Vietnam was too dependent on China and it was a symbol of China's cultural hegemony. One blogger argues that this opposition is simply an attempt to distract attention from Vietnam's many controversies (Huynh, 2013). In Indonesia and Malaysia, CIs are officially known as Kongzi Institute as they feel that the word "Confucius" smacks of religious connotations.

### **Conclusion**

China's rise has provided the immediate impetus to the learning of Chinese. In Southeast Asia, the teaching of the language is taken as a community service by local Chinese communities. China's offer of sponsorship packages through CIs, CCs, educational exchanges



and co-operation, and other schemes have helped to broaden the base for the dissemination of Chinese.

The existence of MSR will reinforce existing channels for the teaching and learning of the language. The formalization of MSR as a coherent idea will more than promote trade and economic development and but will serve as an incentive to expand the teaching of Chinese by building on the groundwork that has been laid. At the macro-level, China's initiatives in regional and sub-regional co-operation will further stimulate economic growth. Well poised to become the next largest and richest economy on earth, China will play a central role that may drive regional development through greater interdependence and integration. The attraction of a foreign language grows in proportion to the economic status of the country concerned. Countries in MSR recognize that a significant part of their economic future is linked to that of China. These links will grow with MSR providing a regional framework to enhance the diplomacy of harmony in the interest of understanding and economic partnership and to encourage cultural and education projects. The MSR region reinforces the appeal of Chinese and the route by which it will travel in the region. Unlike the old Silk Road that was primarily an export route of silk and porcelain, the new Twenty-First Century MSR will meet all-round purposes of which an important one is the "export" of China's culture especially its language, literature, and rich heritage.

On a global basis, the support for the teaching of Chinese in more advanced countries should be balanced by increased focus on countries where English is not widespread. This will meet their need for a second language and to make Chinese as an alternative to English. Africa has shown the highest rate of increase of students studying in China. The demand from the Asian sectors of MSR is potentially large and efforts may be doubled to spur the demand with incentives such as easy access to learning centres, scholarships or exchange schemes.

The diffusion of Chinese in the MSR and in many parts of the world is marked by several features:

1. The learning of Chinese is becoming a worldwide phenomenon which is also receiving active support from China.
2. Governments, academia, and communities are all involved in this process.
3. Schools, families, and students are motivated to learn Chinese in a spontaneous manner.
4. In Southeast Asia, local Chinese communities play a catalytic role in the teaching of Chinese.
5. In the dissemination of Chinese, the method is by means of teaching Chinese as a second language, the motivation of learning is driven by the prospect of future economic benefit, and the appeal of the language is derived from the growing soft power of China's cultural richness.

The growing economic stature of China is providing the pre-condition and incentive for the learning of Chinese. Whether or not the language will gain wide acceptance will depend on how successfully various issues and challenges are overcome. Political and ideological

objections to the learning of Chinese will diminish as the language becomes an indispensable tool in global affairs and as more and more people understand the culture and appreciate the softer side of China. As the learning of Chinese attains “critical mass”, and as it becomes a language of aspiration like English, many may feel that a bilingual English-Chinese environment, rather than English alone, will be essential in the conduct of global economic and political affairs in the future. Chinese will then become an effective bridge between China and its maritime neighbours in Asia as well as in the world.

### Notes

- 1 A “foreign language” is spoken in a country where it cannot normally be used directly in everyday communication locally. A “second language” is one that may be used locally (VanPattern and Benati, 2010: 145).
- 2 In Malaya, records that mentioned the existence Chinese schools appeared as early as 1815 (Kua, 2008: 19).
- 3 In United States measurement, 1 trillion is equal to 1,000,000,000,000.
- 4 In 2010, there were 1,008,101 Chinese children aged between 5 and 14 years. Assuming that 60 per cent are children in the primary school years of 7 to 12, the total number would be 604,840 persons. In the same year, there were 612,064 pupils in Chinese primary schools, of whom 55,975 were non-Chinese. Comparing the two sets of figures, it is clear that 90 per cent of Chinese children were enrolled in Chinese primary schools (DSM, 2011: 15; 《东方日报》/ *Oriental Daily*, 27 December 2010).
- 5 Trade between the two countries has grown from as low as \$2.92 billion in 2000 to a record \$73.9 billion in 2011 and is targeted to reach \$100 billion by 2015 (Jetley, 2013).
- 6 Among many projects, China is actively involved in the development the ports of Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka.

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