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# A third player: Chinese linguistic and cultural influence at a UAE university

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## ABSTRACT

As part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a series of large-scale projects have been launched in the Arab Gulf due to its geopolitically strategic position. We examine the influence of Chinese as a third player, in addition to Arabic and English, in a UAE university educationscape together with Emirati students' attitudes towards its influence. The study takes a case study approach, which employs open-ended questionnaires with university students ( $n = 40$ ), semi-structured interviews with university students ( $n = 3$ ) and a university Confucius Institute director and visual data from a walking ethnography of university social, learning, and online spaces. Data are analysed thematically via the lens of 'Critical, Cultural Political Economy of Education' (CCPEE), which brings together a range of concepts to interrogate globalising processes within an 'education ensemble'. Key findings revealed a growing influence and awareness of Chinese language and culture in the UAE as well as generally positive attitudes towards such growth. There was, however, less interest in learning Chinese in comparison with other languages such as Korean and Turkish connected with soft power and media presence via dramas and music. Implications of the findings are discussed in relation to informing future language policy directions in the UAE.

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## KEYWORDS

Chinese; language policy; United Arab Emirates; higher education; language attitudes

## Introduction

Flying into Dubai after a long summer away, the airport's pristine, high tech and glossy ambiance welcomes back residents and citizens to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). While such atmospheric features of Dubai's airport (DXB) have remained reliably familiar over the years, its linguistic landscape, or the language on signs and in public spaces, has shifted subtly during the last decade. Long-established 'choreographed' bilingual Arabic and English signage (Gu 2023) has started to share space with a language recently elevated in power: Chinese. As China has the second largest economy in the world (Ma 2020) and has emerged as the UAE's top trading partner (Abdulkader and Hassan 2022a), the presence of Chinese is mainly linked to consumerism (Gu 2023). Chinese is thus seen on Duty-Free shopping signs or on magazines advertising events and restaurants. With its homophone nickname 'Do Buy', retail is one of Dubai's major draws and the inclusion of Chinese in commercial spaces highlights the increasing importance of Chinese consumers in the UAE. As Piller (2012) states, 'Chinese tourists are to Dubai what Arab tourists are to Munich: the most lucrative

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group' and 'in a consumer economy, language is a means to make profit and as purchasing power shifts, so do language ideologies' (para. 3). In other words, 'money talks' (Piller 2012; Wang 2020).

A similar pattern continues when leaving the airport and returning to daily life, with the presence of Chinese being no less noticeable in the UAE's many malls and hotels, in Dubai's 'emerging Chinatown' or 'Chinese cluster' including Dragon Mart (Gu 2023), via Chinese zodiac signs and calligraphic decorations for Chinese holidays and the hiring of Mandarin-speaking staff, for example (Wang 2020). Outside the realm of the commercial, Chinese has also increased dramatically in a range of educational contexts such as schools and universities, 'Friday schools' and for-profit private Chinese classes (Wang 2020). There are now around 54,000 Emirati students learning Chinese as a third language in almost 160 public schools in the UAE (Abdulkader and Hassan 2022b). Chinese has also grown in influence via Confucius Institutes which are attached to universities in the UAE's two largest cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Despite the growth of Chinese in education and wider society, research on the Chinese language and culture in the UAE is lacking in comparison with research on English as a global language and English-medium education (EME). A reason for this relates to the long-standing dominance of English as a lingua franca amongst the UAE's large expatriate population (approximately 88.5%) and dominance of EME at all levels of education (Hopkyns 2023a, 2023b; Hopkyns and Gkonou 2023; Hopkyns and Sultana 2024; Wyatt and El Gamal 2023). The presence of English in UAE public spaces, linguistic landscapes, health, business, and international exams has also long occupied researchers' attention (Freimuth 2022; Hopkyns 2021; Hopkyns and van den Hoven 2022; Siemund et al. 2021). Such a focus aligns with research agendas in many other global contexts due to a globalised prioritising of English as a working language attached to symbolic, social, linguistic, economic, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991; Ibrahim and Barnawi 2022; Macaro 2018). While the official language, Arabic, and the global language, English, continue to be the main focus of research projects in the UAE, there have been calls for more attention to be given to under-researched but commonly spoken languages in the Gulf, such as Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and Tagalog (Mandal 2023). Equally, to date, little attention has been given to the position of Chinese in the Gulf as it relates to linguistic and cultural identities and educational policies.

This article aims to help bridge this gap by examining the influence of Chinese as a 'third player' in the UAE's cultural and linguistic market, long dominated by Arabic and English. The article shares empirical data via a case study approach which employs open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with university students and a Confucius Institute director working at an Abu Dhabi government university, which serves a mainly Emirati student body. The study also draws on visual data from a walking ethnography of the university's social, learning, and online spaces. The research questions investigate the influence of Chinese language and culture on the 'educationscape' (Krompák et al. 2022) of a UAE English-medium university as well as students' attitudes towards Chinese language and culture as a form of 'human capital' (economic value of experience and skills). The article ends with a discussion of key findings and recommendations for future language policy directions and further research directions.

## Chinese–UAE relations across domains

### *Multilingualism and multiculturalism in the UAE*

As an oil-rich and fast-developing nation, the UAE's population is both multilingual and multicultural with over 100 languages spoken collectively by residents from almost 200 countries (Hopkyns 2020). Transnational workers outnumber local citizens in the UAE. While statistics vary, the UAE has the highest percentage of transnational residents in the Gulf, together with Qatar, at just under 90 percent in both nations (GLMM 2016; UAE Fact Sheet 2024). Although South Asians have had a prominent presence in the Gulf region for centuries due to trading opportunities (Machado 2014), immigration to the UAE became more expansive and varied in the late twentieth century due to the

nation's rapid development. Currently, the four largest transnational communities in the UAE originate from India (2,600,000), Pakistan (1200,000), Bangladesh (700,000) and the Philippines (525,530) (The Media Lab 2019). Transnational residents from East Asian countries such as China and Korea have also been growing in number in recent years. For example, a wave of approximately 13,000 Koreans recently relocated to the UAE (Amed 2019), due in part to growing business connections. In the case of Chinese expatriates in the UAE, there has been a steep increase from 7000 in the year 2000 to an estimated 400,000 in 2022 (Zhang 2023). Due to the UAE's majority South Asian and Southeast Asian demographics, the most-commonly spoken languages in the UAE other than Arabic and English are Hindi, Farsi, Urdu, Malayalam, Bengali, Tamil, and Tagalog (Hopkyns and van den Hoven 2022). However, in terms of strategic visibility and endorsement of languages other than Arabic and English, Chinese is arguably at the forefront due to its growing power in the region via a range of strategic agreements.

### **Brief history of UAE-China relations**

To understand the relationship between the UAE and China, it is useful to briefly look back in history. Fulton (2019) describes four generalisable periods of relations between China and the UAE/Trucial States (name for UAE's land pre-1971). These four periods include: (1) 'indifference' (1949–1965), (2) 'hospitality' (1966–1971), (3) transition (1971–1990), and (4) interdependence (1990–2012). In the first period, there was little contact between China and the Trucial States, which resulted in mutual indifference due to 'oppositional Cold War alignments, ideological differences and lack of shared interests or threats' (Fulton 2019, p. 254). In the second period, hostility was provoked by the Cultural Revolution. China experienced domestic turmoil and was committed to a revolutionary foreign policy that 'directly threatened monarchic regimes on the Arabian Peninsula' (Fulton, 2019, 255), via China backing a separatist movement in Oman's Dhofar region led by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG). Such involvement negatively affected Trucial States leaders' attitudes towards China. During the third period of transition (1971–1990), hostility began to ease as Chinese leaders moved away from revolutionary foreign policy towards a more pragmatic approach, which involved establishing ties with Gulf states and fostering positive perceptions of Beijing amongst Gulf actors. At the start of this period, the Trucial States became the UAE (December 2nd, 1971) and the new nation looked towards growing its economy and global connections. China's bilateral trade and economic engagement with the Gulf countries was initiated in 1981 as part of Deng Xiaoping's (1978–1989) modernisation drive and desire for oil and gas. As Fulton (2019) states, during this period, 'relations grew steadily and culminated with a state visit from President Yang Shangkun in 1989' (p. 257). President Yang's visit was reciprocated with one by Sheikh Zayed in 1990. This marked the start of the fourth period of 'interdependence', characterised by 'impressive growth in bilateral economic relations' (Fulton 2019, 257).

### **Belt and Road Initiative era**

Following the four initial periods previously outlined, China-UAE relations strengthened further in 2013 when the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, *yid ai yi lu*, 一带一路) era began. The BRI is considered a 'landmark in Chinese foreign policy' (Fulton 2019, 259) and it symbolises China's 'emergence as a world power' (Peters 2020, 4). The BRI aimed to 'strengthen infrastructure, trade, and investment links between China and some 65 other countries that account collectively for over 30 percent of global GDP, 62 percent of population, and 75 percent of energy reserves' (World Bank 2018). This included a series of large-scale projects in a variety of sectors being launched in the Gulf due to its geopolitically strategic position. For example, in 2016 COSCO Shipping signed a thirty-five-year agreement with Khalifa Industrial Zone Abu Dhabi (KIZAD) and in 2017 China National Petroleum Operations (CNPO) won a bid for 8% of Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore

Petroleum Operations Ltd (ADCO) (Graves 2017). During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Abu Dhabi in July 2018, the two countries decided to upgrade their bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership (Hussein et al. 2018), which addressed twelve areas of cooperation related to trade, economics, energy, finance and politics, amongst other aspects. In the summer of 2019, China-UAE ties were strengthened even further when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed visited Beijing. From this visit, he stated, 'we share common aspirations, ambition, a vision of investment in human capital and envisage a future of safety, peace and stability worldwide. The UAE and China are moving towards a promising future' (The National, as cited in Fulton 2019, 264). True to the goals of the BRI, the UAE was not the only nation China strengthened ties with. In other Gulf states and beyond, notably in Africa, a 'trading revolution' (Obeng 2020, 104) developed. The evolving bilateral ties between China and the UAE have strongly shaped the flows of Chinese people, goods, and capital into the region (Wang 2021).

## **Applying the theoretical lens of 'Critical, cultural political economy of education' (CCPEE) to Chinese in UAE education**

### ***Chinese language and culture in UAE educational contexts***

Together with China's 'trading revolution' (Obeng 2020, 104) in the UAE and elsewhere (Fulton 2019; Obeng 2020; Peters 2020), Chinese language and cultural practices have also grown in influence, effect, and power. In the UAE, various instigators such as the government, embassies, universities, schools, teachers, learners, businesses, and investors have channelled energy and resources into promoting Chinese language and cultural values, especially since 2018. According to Gil (2021), since the turn of the twenty-first century, the world has been drawn to Chinese in new proportions, known as 'Chinese fever' or '*hanyu re*, 汉语热' (p. 1) due to the rise of China and its various forms of power. When languages become associated with power, this 'in turn influences their use, status and acquisition' (Gil 2021, 1) leading to 'macroacquisition', or large-scale acquisition for a range of purposes and by a range of actors (Brutt-Griffler 2002). Cultural influence is often viewed as a type of 'soft power', which can be defined as 'the ability to get what you want through persuasion or attraction in the form of culture, values, and policies' (Nye 2009). In the case of Chinese, cultural and linguistic influence can be seen via the presence of Confucius Institutes, which were launched in 2004 by Haban (汉办), a non-profit agency affiliated with the Education Ministry of the People's Republic of China, for the purpose of 'developing Chinese language and culture teaching resources and making its services available worldwide, meeting the demands of overseas Chinese learners and contributing to global cultural diversity and harmony' (Gil 2024; Ye 2017). Confucius Institutes began to appear in Arabic-speaking countries in 2006 (Yellinek et al. 2020) and there are now 15 Confucius Institutes in 11 countries in the Middle East (Kang 2021) and two in the UAE (located within universities in Abu Dhabi and Dubai).

Chinese language education has been promoted in the UAE through a multitude of policy initiatives. In 2006, the first Chinese language course was introduced to Hamdan Zayed School with just 20 students attending (Kang 2021). Since then, Chinese has grown substantially and is now taught 'in 158 public schools' with approximately '54,000 students' enrolled (Abdulkader and Hassan 2022b, 2), with the aim of preparing pupils to be competitive in the future job market. In UAE schools, there are at least 17 different curriculums (Wang 2020), but the most popular curriculums for private and international schools are British and American. While Chinese is growing in influence in UAE's commercial spaces, there were still no full-time Chinese-medium schools until September 2020 when the 'Chinese School Dubai' opened its door (Wang 2022). Wang (2020) states this late start could be due to the prioritising of English by the Chinese diasporic community. Many families send their children to English-medium schools and rely on extra schools in the UAE and long-distance educational providers based in Mainland China for the teaching of Chinese. Alongside the introduction of Chinese at the school level, universities have also started

incorporating Chinese language classes into their agendas for faculty, staff, and students as well as building Chinese cultural centres and hosting events such as Lunar New Year celebrations and lantern festivals in association with the Confucius Institute.

To date, few studies have investigated perspectives on the growing influence of China in the UAE. A global survey named ‘The Pew Global Attitudes Survey’ (5 Charts on Global Views of China, 2018) assessed attitudes towards China and found both ‘panda-huggers (or Sinophilia) and panda-haters (or Sinophobia)’ (Wang 2020, 188), with many countries in the Gulf falling into the former category. In the UAE, Wang’s (2020) cross-sectional study used surveys and focus groups to gauge the outcome of China’s soft power. Responses were gathered from 606 Gulf residents from 55 different nations, with approximately one third being Emirati. The study was broad in scope with questions focusing on China’s economic power, China’s role in regional and global affairs, the quality of Chinese products, and the attractiveness of Chinese culture, medicine, and its educational system. Most respondents were confident about China’s economic growth in the next 5–10 years and most (60%) felt China was able to exert positive influence in the international community. Missing to date from the knowledge base is a study focused specifically on the influence of Chinese on education and attitudes of local university students towards the growing influence of Chinese.

### ***Theoretical lens of critical, cultural political economy of education (CCPEE)***

As education, including language education, is not detached from geopolitics, economies, and societies (Hopkyns et al. 2024), a useful theoretical lens through which to investigate the growth of Chinese language and culture in the UAE is ‘Critical, Cultural Political Economy of Education’ (CCPEE) (Robertson and Dale 2015). CCPEE brings together a range of concepts – critical, cultural, political and economy – to interrogate globalising processes within an ‘education ensemble’ (Robertson and Dale 2015). In this sense, multiple factors and dynamics intersect, converge and interplay when investigating the social phenomenon of Chinese as a global language (Gil, 2021) and as a locally strategic language in UAE education (Fulton 2019).

To investigate the influence of Chinese in UAE education and stakeholders’ attitudes towards Chinese, it is recognised that neither education nor language exists in a vacuum. The concept of ‘education ensembles’ recognises the complexities of educational policies, including language-in-education policies, such as the introduction of Chinese into UAE education, in its various forms. Taking a CCPEE approach provides a deeper analysis of educational contexts by investigating how intersecting factors such as globalisation, ‘Chinese fever’, ‘soft power’ through cultural influence, the ‘money talks’ phenomenon (the power of countries with strong economies) and strategic partnerships converge to affect language-in-education policies. As Robertson and Dale (2015) explain, the CCPEE theoretical lens allows for ‘interrogation of globalising processes within the educational ensemble’ (p. 151) through critical realist assumptions whereby it is recognised that the social world is comprised of a stratified ensemble of structures and relations (p. 152).

Together with the concept of educational ensembles, the concept of ‘educationscapes’ (Krompák et al. 2022) is deemed important. An educationscape not only covers formal educational trajectories (kindergarten to high education) but also considers ‘educational spaces annexed to and serving these formal institutions’ (Krompák et al. 2022, 5). This includes, for example, after-school learning clubs or cultural events with a pedagogical purpose. Educationscapes also include ‘spaces of state institutions in which the linguistic and semiotic landscapes are mobilised to instruct, educate and govern people with language’ (Krompák et al. 2022, 5). With this theoretical background in mind, the following section will explain the study, participants involved, data collection tools and analysis.

### **Study**

The research takes a case study approach which employs open-response questionnaires with university students ( $n = 40$ ) and semi-structured interviews with university students ( $n = 3$ ) and a

Confucius Institute director ( $n = 1$ ) working at a large public university in Abu Dhabi. The university was chosen due to the researchers' having access to it and the fact that it had a Confucius Institute on site that serves primarily Emirati students. Case study approaches investigate bounded systems such as a class, school, or community with the aim of penetrating situations in a way not always possible via numerical analysis (Cohen et al. 2007). Case studies are set in temporal, geographical, institutional, and other contexts that enable boundaries to be established around the case. In our descriptive case study (Yin 1984), the case includes multiple individuals (university students and a Confucius Institute director) who are bound by space and time. They were all located at the university at the time of the study (spring semester 2023). As Geertz (1973) points out, case studies aim to catch the close reality of participants' lived experiences via 'thick description' which enables deep understanding of 'a phenomenon in its real-life context' and recognition of 'complexity and embeddedness of social truths' (Cohen et al. 2007, 254-256).

In addition, the study draws on visual data (eight photographs) from a walking ethnography of the university social, learning, and online 'educationscape' (Krompák et al. 2022) which relate to Chinese language and culture. The eight pictures presented in this paper were part of a larger corpus of signage and language objects collected from the university as part of a larger study looking at transnational university educationscapes.

The study aims to address two main research questions:

RQ1: In which ways does Chinese language and culture influence the educationscape of a government university in Abu Dhabi, UAE?

RQ2: What are the attitudes of Emirati university students toward Chinese language and culture as human capital?

The 40 questionnaire respondents were all female undergraduate students taking mandatory English courses at a large government university in Abu Dhabi. They were all female due to the first author only having access to classes on the female side of the campus during this period. The students were all in their second year of their degree programmes and were aged between 19 and 24. They all named Arabic as their first language and English as their second language, with a range of other languages spoken at varying proficiency levels, as emerged from the findings.

Cluster sampling was used for the questionnaire respondents as the students were already in groups (classes). Standard ethical procedures were followed. Students were informed that participation in the study was voluntary, and that data used in the writing up of the study would be anonymised. They were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time. From a total of 48 students present on the day the study was presented, 40 chose to take part. This was a high response rate of approximately 83 percent.

To gain more in-depth responses, volunteers were asked to participate in face-to-face recorded semi-structured interviews, based on the same questions which appeared in the questionnaire, with room for expansion and diversions. Participants were asked seven questions in the questionnaire which focused on interest / lack of interest in learning Chinese (and other languages), perceived importance of Chinese, perspectives on the presence of Chinese in the educationscape and associations with Chinese. The same topics were covered in the semi-structured interviews with follow-up questions allowing for more details to be gained. The questionnaires were given to students within class time and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. An alternative activity was provided for those choosing not to take part. The interviews took place in the first researcher's office.

Three students volunteered to take part in the interviews. One of these students was from Class 1 (Table 1), the other two were friends / family members of students in Class 2. In this case, snowball sampling was used as students identified fellow students who may be interested in answering questions on the topic. Further details about the three student interviewees can be seen in Table 2.

In addition to student perspectives, it was deemed important to include the perspective of the Chinese Director of the Confucius Institute at the university, 'Min' (Table 3). The first author

**Table 1.** University student questionnaire respondents.

| Class | Course                     | Number of students | Number of questionnaire respondents |
|-------|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1     | English Composition II     | 20                 | 18                                  |
| 2     | English Composition II     | 16                 | 12                                  |
| 3     | English in the professions | 12                 | 10                                  |
| Total |                            | 48                 | 40                                  |

**Table 2.** University student interviewees.

| Student pseudonym | Approximate duration | Details   |
|-------------------|----------------------|---|
| Fatima            | 25 min               | Student in Class 1 who opted to take part in the interview instead of completing the questionnaire due to her strong interest in Asian literature.  |
| Maryam            | 20 min               | A friend of a student in Class 2. She was also a second-year student at the university, majoring in International Relations. She wanted to be interviewed as she had an interest in Asian culture.                            |
| Mohammed          | 20 min               | The brother of a student in Class 2. He was a student at the university taking the same English course, amongst others. He was nominated as he had recently attended a Chinese cultural event on the male side of the campus. |

**Table 3.** Interviewee from the University Confucius Institute.

| Confucius institute staff pseudonym | Approximate duration | Details  |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|--|
| Min                                 | 1 h                  | Chinese director of the Confucius Institute at a government university in Abu Dhabi, since 2016. Before moving to the UAE, Min was an English language teacher in China. |

met Min (pseudonym) at a Chinese cultural event being held in the university’s Chinese Centre in April 2023. Min was interested in taking part in the study due to having rich and informative information and observations to share after having worked at the university for the last seven years. Min’s perspective not only sheds lights on the role of Confucius Institutes in promoting Chinese language education, but also illustrates individual agency in facilitating cultural exchanges. The interview with Min took place online via Zoom.

Data was analysed via thematic analysis (TA) with the aim of shedding light on university students’ attitudes towards and enthusiasm for learning Chinese as well as the influence of Chinese language and culture in a UAE university educationscape. Braun and Clarke (2006) conceptualise TA as ‘a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (p. 79). Six stages of coding were used: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and labelling themes, and (6) reporting the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). To authentically represent the data in the participants’ own words, representative quotes were selected to demonstrate nuanced experiences and attitudes.

## Findings

The findings are reported under two subheadings, which are based on RQ1 and RQ2, respectively. As thematic analysis was used across the data sets (questionnaire, interview data, linguistic landscape corpus), main themes were identified and presented in the form of charts and summaries. In addition, representative quotes and photographs of signage / language objects are shared for nuanced perspectives, and to show Chinese in the offline and online educationscape. The quantified data relates to the 40 questionnaire respondents and the qualitative data includes both questionnaire respondents and interviewees.

## Chinese language and cultural influence in the educationscape of a UAE English-medium university

### Theme 1: the growth of Chinese in the UAE

The first theme identified across the data sets (questionnaires and interviews) was ‘the growth of Chinese in the UAE’. Most university student questionnaire respondents felt the presence of Chinese was increasing (92.5%). When giving examples of how Chinese was increasing, the most common area mentioned was education or schools (73%). This was followed by trade / business / consumerism related to products ‘made in China’ (16%), cultural growth (14%), tourism (11%), social media (5%) and Chinese transnational residents in the UAE (5%) (Figure 1).

Often students mentioned more than one area of growth, as seen in Extract 1, with the mention of Chinese in schools and increased Chinese tourism, and Extract 2 which mentions trade and education:

Extract 1:

Yes, I do think that Chinese is growing in the UAE. When the public schools and universities have given the opportunity for students to learn how to speak Chinese, it began to rise more. The areas are learning how to speak Chinese. In addition, it started increasing when Chinese people visit the UAE. (Marwa)

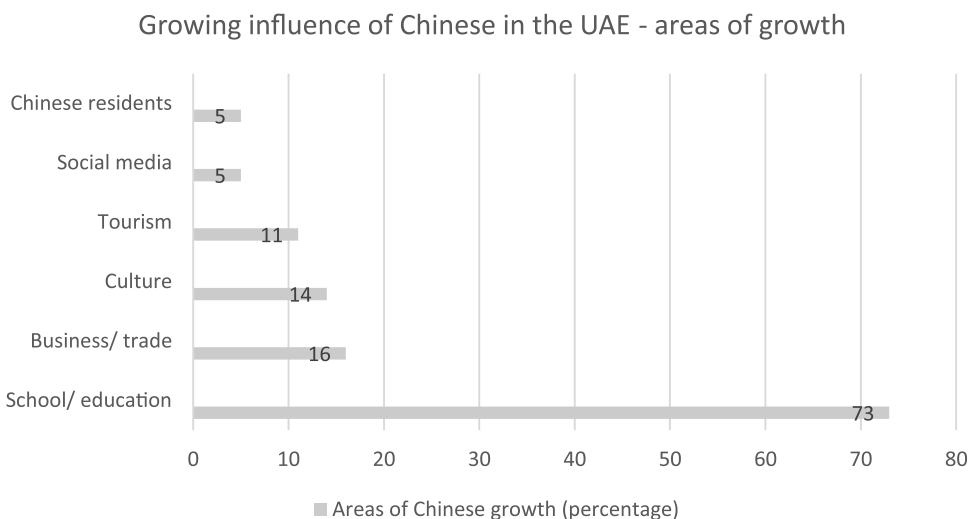
Extract 2:

Yes. The ruler of the UAE made a contract with China. Everything that we buy like toys, stationary, furniture are mostly made in China. Also nowadays, UAE schools are teaching Chinese language to young ones and even adults. (Shamma)

The three students who were interviewed also felt Chinese was growing in the UAE. Maryam’s comment specifically mentions her relatives who are learning Chinese in government schools (Extract 3).

Extract 3:

Yes. It’s growing because nowadays in schools, they have been teaching the Chinese language for the students, so I think it’s growing because of its culture and language which is hard to learn. They want to change to have a third language that the citizens need to learn and educate themselves. My relatives are learning Chinese at school. (Maryam)



**Figure 1.** University student questionnaire respondents’ perceptions of Chinese growth in the UAE.

From the perspective of the director of the university Confucius Institute, Min, there has been an increased interest in Chinese at the university which is partly due to the UAE government's emphasis on strong relations between the two nations (Extract 4).

Extract 4:

At the higher government level, they emphasize the relationship with China and most UAE people here would think about Chinese language and culture, they want to embrace. They are ready to embrace because of the general relationship between the two countries. So, this is a very positive change in the last seven years. We witnessed a big increase in the interest and numbers of students learning. (Min)

A key takeaway from this section is the strong association between the growth of Chinese in the UAE and the teaching of Chinese in schools and universities. Growth of Chinese in education sectors was mentioned by almost three quarters of the students, with other areas only being mentioned by less than a quarter of the students.

### *Theme 2: welcoming of Chinese language and culture in the university educationscape*

A second key theme to emerge was the general acceptance and welcoming of Chinese language and culture in the university educationscape. For this question, participants were shown eight pictures (Figures 2–4) of Chinese cultural and linguistic artefacts, areas, and events on the campus. The first image in Figure 2 showed the 'Chinese Center' on the male side of the campus which contained images and information about China's history and culture on its walls as well as displaying Chinese artefacts such as traditional instruments and art. The centre hosts regular Chinese cultural events. The second image in Figure 2 showed packages of sweets given out to students and staff to celebrate the Luna New Year – the Year of the Rabbit, and the third picture showed Chinese symbols and artefacts displayed in the university's 'Chinese Corner' in the library.

The first picture in Figure 3 showed the presence of Chinese language in the Chinese Corner, which teaches students the Chinese script and the meaning behind Chinese letters. Students can take away this information by tearing off one of the papers from the bottom of the lantern. The second image in Figure 3 shows the Chinese Corner guest book where students have left comments about events held there or the space itself. Some of the comments are in Chinese, but most are in English.

In Figure 4, a series of university announcements for Chinese events include a Chinese Spring Festival, a Chinese Lantern Festival, and Chinese language classes. These notices were sent out via email to students, faculty, and staff at the university.

The response to Chinese cultural items, events, and language around the campus was mainly positive (95%) with adjectives used, ranging from 'nice' and 'interesting' to 'beautiful', 'amazing' and 'impressive'. Only two student questionnaire participants (5%) were indifferent or neutral to the presence of Chinese on campus. When looking beyond initial positive adjectives used, students reflected on a range of reasons for their opinions (Figure 5) including the merits of learning or



**Figure 2.** Chinese cultural presence in the university educationscape.

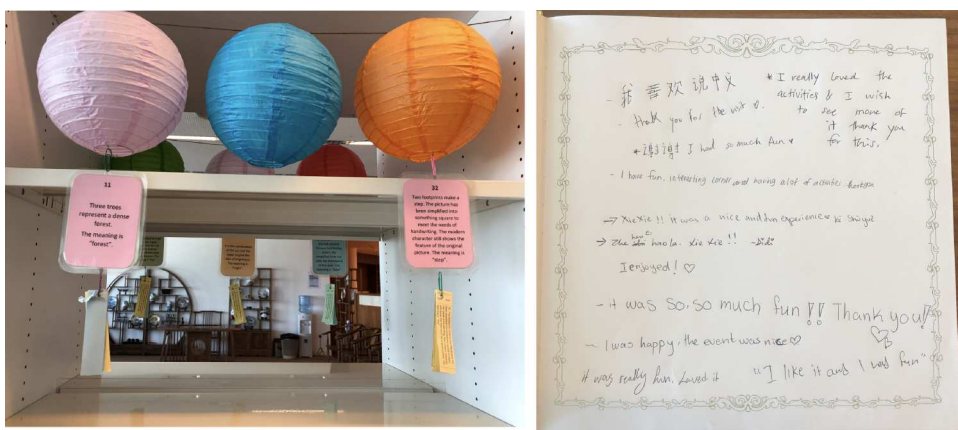


Figure 3. Chinese linguistic presence in the university educationscape.



Figure 4. Chinese-related events and languages classes at the university.

### Reasons for welcoming Chinese cultural artefacts, events, and language in the university educationscape

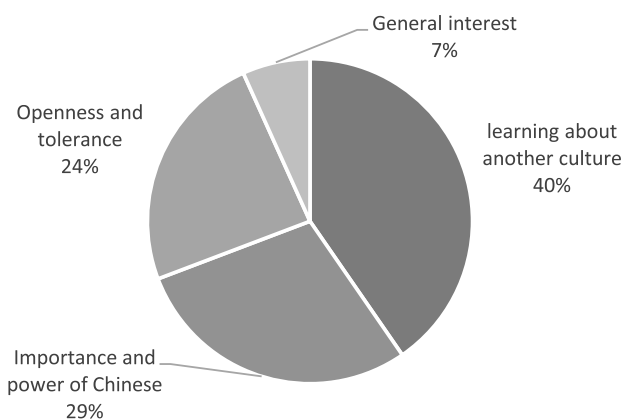


Figure 5. Reasons for welcoming Chinese cultural artefacts, events, and language in the university educationscape.

gaining knowledge about other cultures in general (40%), the power, usefulness and importance of Chinese as a language (29%), being open and tolerant to other cultures (24%) and general interest (7%).

In their own words, students' responses were sometimes quite general and could be applied to any additional language and culture (Extract 5), and other times students' comments related specifically to Chinese, as seen in Extract 6 and 7.

Extract 5:

I feel that as an Emirati, I'm open to other cultures and languages. Our country has a majority expatriate population, and our leaders are promoting tolerance and cultural positivity, so I welcome other people to show their cultures with a reasonable approach and respect to the country's traditions and rules. (Alya)

Extract 6:

It's important in today's world to be more fluent in several languages, specifically Chinese. Since I believe their population is massively growing day by day. Since many of them get out of their own ways into learning English or Arabic, why don't we start integrating into their world and language. (Dana)

Extract 7:

I really feel amazed because as in forever, their culture amazes me and not to mention that suddenly I started to watch some Chinese programs and my sister is learning the language. I think it's a great influence to us and we could learn so much from them. (Noor)

In Min's interview, she discussed the efforts made on her part to initiate the 'China Corner' in the university library. With the support of the Chinese Embassy, the China Corner aims to create a Chinese atmosphere to the university educationscape and increase interest in the Chinese courses offered. Min also described nationwide Chinese competitions with students of all ages, one of which took place the day before the interview (Extract 8).

Extract 8:

At university here, we try and get students to be interested in Chinese. Every year we hold many cultural events. This is a picture you took from our 'China corner'. This China corner, I personally wrote a lot of emails to get the university to approve to have it installed there. All the money came from the Chinese Embassy to put the China corner so students feel this is a very China atmosphere here. At the university, we have about 200 students every year register for Chinese language. At yesterday's event, at the Confucius Institute, we send announcement and ask students to send videos of them speaking Chinese or to show their Chinese talent. For example, certain Chinese calligraphy or they do some Chinese dance. This year, 450 students participated in the whole UAE. We then arranged judges to evaluate and give marks, and then we selected the top 32 and these 32 contestants did a final competition on site yesterday at the University of Dubai, at the Confucius Institute Dubai University. We are working together with support from the Chinese Embassy. (Min)

Min's comment in Extract 8 demonstrates the work that has gone into promoting Chinese in the university and beyond, drawing on outside funding.

From the student interviews, Mohammed (the only male in the study) had attended the Lunar New Year event at the university's Chinese centre, located on the male side of the campus. He contrasted the influence of Chinese with that of English. He mentioned that the presence of English tended to be 'modern', whereas cultural artefacts at the university's Chinese centre and events were traditional, which he found interesting (Extract 9).

Extract 9:

The Chinese culture is old. Everything there was from 100 years ago or older. It's interesting. The people were too kind. They want to share their culture because the government of Chinese is trying to share their culture. I think they supported many institutions teaching in Chinese, for free, in Africa, I think. (Mohammed)

Mohammed's comment shows an awareness of educationscapes beyond the university, the role the government plays, and a similar 'Chinese fever' (*hanyu re*) phenomenon in other contexts, such as Africa.

## ***Attitudes of Emirati university students towards Chinese language and culture as human capital.***

### ***Theme 3: importance of Chinese for young Emiratis***

A third key theme which relates to the second research question on attitudes towards Chinese language and culture, was the belief that Chinese is important for young Emiratis to learn. Most participants voiced this perspective (68%), with only 22% disagreeing and 10% being unsure (Figure 6).

For the former group, the most common reason for the importance of Chinese was its status as a 'big language' or 'language of the future' (30%) (Extract 10). Chinese was also seen as an important way of gaining knowledge (25%) (Extract 11), and as helping maintain a strong economy and international relations (15%).

Extract 10:

Before 5 years ago I will say no but nowadays, yes, it's important to learn. I read an article that says that the most language will be used in the world will be in the top 5 Chinese. (Mira)

Extract 11:

Yes, learning about other languages keeps people more aware of the other culture for additional information. (Ameera)

For those disagreeing, the primary reason was that 'English is more important' (Extract 12) and learning Chinese is 'nice' but not 'important' (Extract 13). Those who were unsure stated that it depends on the person and circumstances.

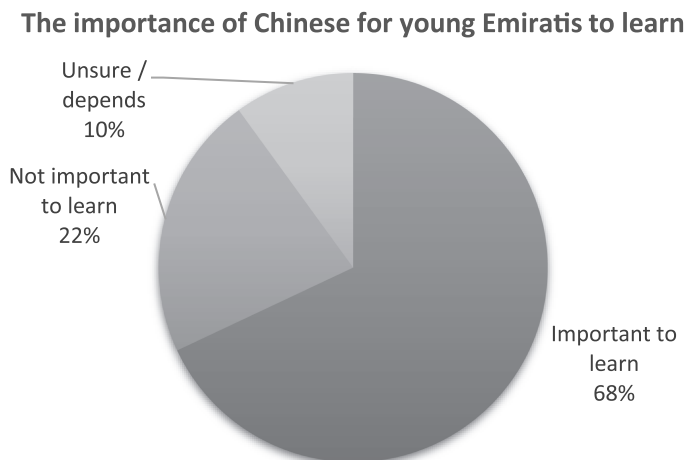
Extract 12:

No, because I don't see the world needs Chinese language to live since most of the people speak English and it is considered as one important language. (Sameera)

Extract 13:

I don't think as a young Emirati it's important but it's nice to learn and talk Chinese. (Khulood)

Despite her efforts to promote Chinese language and culture as part of her role, Min stated that she views English as being more important than Chinese in the UAE, and this is a situation she cannot imagine changing in the foreseeable future. However, she felt that Chinese is the third most



**Figure 6.** Perspectives on the importance of learning Chinese for young Emiratis.

important language (after Arabic and English) and the second most important additional language taught in public schools (Extract 14).

Extract 14:

Chinese is spoken by the largest number of people in the world but compared with English, you cannot compare. English is much more important than Chinese because English is the most widely spoken language. This, no one can change and no one can challenge. I also think English is very important. Chinese for a long time will not surpass English or not even close. In public school it is the second most important language. (Min)

#### **Theme 4: mixed personal interest in learning Chinese**

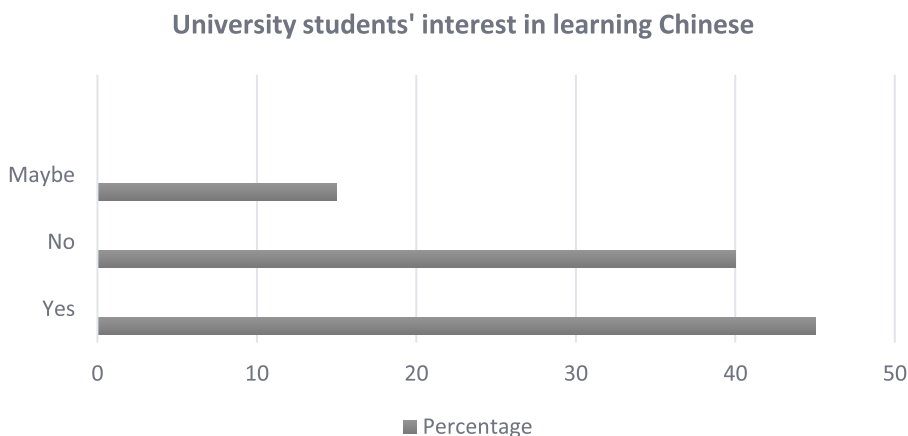
A fourth key theme to emerge was mixed interest in learning Chinese amongst the university student participants. When asked about interest in learning Chinese, student responses were divided, with 45% saying 'yes', 15% saying 'maybe' and 40% saying 'no' (Figure 7). This contrasts with responses to the previous question regarding the importance of learning Chinese for young Emiratis (school children), where the majority felt it was an important language to learn.

The most common reasons for wanting to learn Chinese amongst the university student participants echoed responses to the question about attitudes towards Chinese in the educationscape. For example, Chinese was seen as an interesting, cool, unique and inspiring language to learn. It was also deemed as important for global communication and getting a job by some students. For those who were not interested in learning Chinese, the most common reason was that it was a difficult language as well as not having time. The former reason was also reflected upon in Min's interview where she commented on students' interest in Chinese language classes waning as the semester went on, due to the large linguistic distance between Chinese, Arabic, and English (Extract 15).

Extract 15:

At the end of the term, many of them drop out because Chinese language is very distant and different from Arabic language and English. So, when they have to put more efforts to learn it's very difficult. In spite of the interest, they'll drop out a lot. Maybe 10% of students can achieve something. Traditionally students here don't face as much pressure as us Chinese. (Min)

A further reason for students choosing not to learn Chinese included the feeling that other languages were more important or more interesting. When asked which other languages they were interested in learning, the most popular choice was Spanish (40%), Turkish (23%) and Korean (18%). Further languages mentioned included Japanese, French, Italian, Russian, Urdu and 'proper Arabic'. Spanish was a popular choice due to similarities between Arabic and Spanish. Many students watch a lot of Turkish and Korean series, and enjoy Japanese anime, which sparked an interest



**Figure 7.** University students' personal interest in learning Chinese.

in these languages, in particular (Extracts 16-17). Interestingly, one student felt she needed to learn her first language properly before learning another language (Extract 18).

Extract 16:

Japanese and Korean. Japanese because of anime and manga. Korean because of K-dramas and K-pop. (Arwa)

Extract 17:

I'm interested in learning Korean and Turkish because they're easy to learn and I like watching drama and really interested in their culture and language. (Sara)

Extract 18:

I'm interested in learning the proper Arabic because I'm only fluent in casual Arabic. (Abeer)

From the interviews, Fatima explained that she was drawn to Japanese through reading Japanese fiction and Korean due to watching K-drama and variety shows (Extract 19).

Extract 19:

I got interested in Japanese because of joining 'Good Reads' and reading Japanese fiction that was recommended like books by Banana Yoshimoto and Osamu Dazai. I got interested in Korean because of the drama and variety show because its fun. At first, I didn't understand what they were saying but as I continued, I got interested in what they were saying, and I continued with subtitles. I learned the language and I could laugh. (Fatima)

Arwa, Sara, and Fatima's comments demonstrate the importance of soft power when capturing interest. Min recognised that other Asian languages are often more appealing to Emirati students due to their dramas being popular and easily accessible on Netflix. However, she felt an effective way of utilising soft power to foster a deep interest in China could come through 'China Camps' for female university students (Extract 20).

Extract 20:

Before the pandemic, we took university female students to China during spring break. Students only pay international airfare. They are 10 days stay in China. They go there to study for two weeks for China camp. They study language in the morning, and they do Chinese arts. In the afternoon, the university will take them to visit museums and tourist places and you know China-Arabic relationship museum, like their embassy so they have better understanding of Chinese culture. Before the pandemic, every year we do this until the pandemic, and then we stopped. Then it turned to online camp which is very different from really go to China. (Min)

The following section will discuss the key themes arising from the findings in relation to previous literature and the theory of 'Critical, Cultural Political Economy of Education' (CCPEE) before making recommendations for future language policy directions and further research directions, in the article's conclusion.

## Discussion

As China is the UAE's largest trade partner (Bains 2019), it is perhaps not surprising to see the influence of Chinese in commercial spaces and to see participants' recognition of growing UAE-Chinese trade. However, what is more surprising is the growth of Chinese language and culture in the broad domain of education. The findings from the study revealed concerted effort and resources being funnelled into the promotion of Chinese language and culture in UAE educationscapes and the way in which these efforts have been widely embraced by students. Through the lens of 'Critical, Cultural Political Economy of Education' (CCPEE) (Robertson and Dale 2015), it is recognised that educationscapes do not exist as solitary entities, but rather they critically intersect with cultural, political, and economic globalising processes. The findings shone a light on the interconnectedness of these aspects via participants' regular references to culture, politics and economics when discussing the influence of Chinese in the university educationscape and attitudes towards its influence.

Related to the first research question, it was surprising to see that the primary area where Chinese had grown in the UAE was connected to educational contexts such as schools. Students were aware of the teaching of Chinese in public schools and often mentioned younger school-age relatives who were studying Chinese. This seemed to be a key symbol for the rising power of Chinese in the UAE. Another key finding related to the first research question was the growing influence of Chinese language and culture in the university educationscape. Min, the director of the university's Confucius Institute, explained in detail her efforts to create a 'Chinese atmosphere' in the university's China Corner and promote the Chinese language via university language classes, UAE-wide Chinese language competitions and 'China camps'. From the university students' perspectives, the presence of Chinese in their educationscape was welcomed and embraced. This finding supports previous research investigating attitudes towards China and Chinese, which, generally speaking, identified the UAE, and other Gulf nations, as 'panda-huggers' rather than 'panda-haters' (Wang 2020). Findings also revealed students were aware of government endorsement (politics), trade agreements (economics) and the goals of Confucius Institutes (culture / soft power) which influenced language-in-education policies. Awareness of the growth of Chinese influence outside the UAE was also shown via the mention of Chinese being a global language and similar patterns of influence being present on other continents, such as Africa (Hodzi 2020).

For the second research question, attitudes towards learning Chinese were generally positive, especially regarding the importance of young Emiratis learning Chinese. This was due to Chinese being seen as a 'big language' and important for the future, as human capital. However, Min and some of the university student participants pointed out that in comparison to English, Chinese was not as important in the UAE. There was a resignation, even voiced by Min, that English would continue to be more powerful and useful in the UAE for the foreseeable future. This led some students to state that learning Chinese was 'nice' or 'good' but not 'important'. Such statements support previous research on the dominance of English in multiple domains in the UAE as well as prestige attached to it in terms of capital (Hopkyns 2020, 2023b; Siemund et al. 2021). When asked about personal interest in learning Chinese, participants were less enthusiastic with less than half stating an interest in learning Chinese. This was partly due to the language being seen as hard and linguistically distant from Arabic and English, lack of time and a stronger interest in other languages such as Korean, Turkish, Spanish, and Japanese, for example. Soft power via drama, literature, and music often increased students' interest in languages other than Arabic and English. This was also found to be the case in previous studies, with Gulf students, such as Qatari nationals having an interest in learning Turkish language due to watching Turkish dramas (Hillman 2023) and Emirati students learning Korean due to K-pop and K-drama (van den Hoven and Carroll, 2017).

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to bridge a gap in the current knowledge base by investigating the influence of Chinese language and culture on a government university educationscape in Abu Dhabi, UAE. While a copious amount of research has been conducted on the influence of English in the region, little previous research has looked at Chinese in the UAE, especially related to education. By examining the influence of Chinese as a 'third player' in the UAE's cultural and linguistic ecology promoted by the state, this article sheds light on attitudes towards an under-researched but increasingly important language in the region.

Based on the findings, the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and the UAE has been effective in its goals of tightening ties and fostering positive feelings towards China amongst UAE citizens. With the introduction of Chinese to public schools and many other forms of education, there is an underlying goal of preparing a multilingual workforce (Arabic, English and Chinese speakers). Based on participants' perspectives, this is a policy which is welcomed. In terms of ways in which a deeper and more widespread interest in learning Chinese can be fostered amongst

young adults, a focus on soft power seems to be the most effective tool. Languages such as Korean and Turkish are popular with Emirati university students due to modern dramas on Netflix and modern pop music. The soft power of Chinese showcased via cultural events and areas at the university, on the other hand, tends to be traditional, narrower in scope, and related to festivals. Despite Beijing's keen interest in promoting the global reach of Chinese television and film products, its stringent censorship prevents the Chinese cultural industry's full engagement with the global mediascape. If Chinese popular culture such as TV series, bands or literature held the same appeal as those from Korea and Turkey, increased interest in the language and culture amongst Emirati university students may follow. In terms of broad education ensembles, future language policy directions in the UAE could have an increased focus on modern Chinese culture.

To broaden the scope of this research, a wider and more diverse participant group could be surveyed and interviewed, as the current study involved only female university students ( $n = 43$ ), except one male university student. There may be a difference in terms of male and female attitudes towards Chinese language and culture, which would be interesting to investigate. It would also be valuable to consider the nuanced influence of the global political order on the UAE's education-scape. For example, while the UAE government universities have long embraced Chinese language through the Confucius Institute, the American University of Sharjah never pursued a partnership with the Institute. Instead, the university offered French classes periodically, and introduced Korean classes in Fall 2023. Further research specifically on the soft power of Chinese in comparison to other languages in the UAE, would also be valuable in terms of future policy making. To broaden the research further, considering China's relations with other Arab nations in terms of education would also be insightful, especially in light of the 'three summits' (Niu and Wang 2023), the latter of which took place in December 2022 in Riyadh and involved representatives from 21 countries in the Arab league. Not only did Chinese and Saudi Arabia's relations strengthen via the China–Arab States Summit in 2022, but more generally the summit 'created favourable conditions for China and the Arab world to build a China–Arab community with a shared future' (Niu and Wang 2023, 29). Finally, as language policy and influence evolve quickly in the UAE's 'climate of fast-paced change' (Hopkins 2020), assessing the influence of and attitudes towards Chinese needs to be reinvestigated regularly.

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