

LEARNING CHINESE AT CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES IN MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITIES: PERSPECTIVES FROM EAST MALAYSIA THROUGH A CULTURAL DIPLOMACY LENS

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Global demand for Chinese as a foreign language has surged, especially in Southeast Asia, driven by China's growth. Malaysia, with strong China ties, has high demand, partly met by Confucius Institutes (CIs), yet research on East Malaysian university CIs is scarce. Since Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) launched East Malaysia's first CI in 2019, its operations and learner experiences require systematic study. This research addresses this gap, exploring Chinese learning realities at UMS's CI to illuminate dynamics in multilingual, cross-cultural contexts.

Methodology: A qualitative case study was used, with semi-structured interviews of two CI management directors and three students (purposively sampled to capture institutional and learner perspectives). Interviews focused on experiences, pedagogy, challenges, and strategies. Data were analyzed via thematic coding in Microsoft Excel to identify key patterns.

Findings: Students highlighted five factors: (a) mixed motivations (career/interest), (b) contextual pedagogy effectiveness, (c) limited immersive cultural engagement, (d) productive skill acquisition barriers, and (e) needs for program enhancement. Directors emphasized: (a) the integrative mission, (b) aligning with local needs, (c) multifaceted challenges, and (d) growth through community collaboration.

Contributions: This study fills a gap on East Malaysian CIs, offering insights for improving programs (e.g., cultural immersion, skill practice). It enriches understanding of global language initiatives in local contexts, guiding educators, policymakers, and future research on Chinese education in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Chinese education, Confucius Institute, cultural diplomacy, Malaysia-China relation, East Malaysia.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the teaching and learning of Chinese have seen a steady rise as a crucial second or foreign language, both within China and in international contexts. Given that Chinese exhibits significant typological differences from Western languages and their respective cultural frameworks, scholarly inquiry into Chinese language acquisition holds substantial value for advancing and validating second language (L2) theoretical frameworks (Han, 2017). This linguistic-culture dynamic ties closely to the broader concept of culture itself, defined by Hofstede (1994) as the shared mental framework that distinguishes individuals from different groups. Culture is of great importance to a nation, as it influences how people think, what they value, and how they prefer to act. The concept of cultural distance, which refers to the differences between cultures, may pose a barrier to cooperation among various countries. It is reasonable to assume that when entities opt to collaborate with countries or regions where the cultural gap is smaller, it is more likely to enhance efficiency and reduce costs.

As globalization progresses and China becomes more deeply integrated into the global community, there has been a noticeable rise in the interest of people from other countries in the Chinese language and culture. Recognizing this trend and drawing on the experiences of countries like the United Kingdom with its British Council, France with its Alliance Française, and Germany with its Goethe Institut in setting up foreign language and cultural communication institutions, China has put forward a collaborative framework (Ngu & Ngeow, 2021). This framework involves cooperation between domestic and foreign institutions to establish Chinese language communication centers, known as Confucius Institutes (CIs), in countries that have a demand for them. These institutes serve as bridges, not only aiding in the learning of the Chinese language but also providing a platform for exploring Chinese culture. In this way, they promote mutual understanding and cultural exchange between China and the international community.

Since their establishment in 2004, CIs have been operated and funded by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), a branch of China's Ministry of Education. The first CI was established in Seoul, South Korea, in 2004, and they have since expanded rapidly across the globe (Li & Tian, 2016). The Belt and Road Initiative has further driven the establishment of CIs worldwide (An, 2019), endowing them with the missions of promoting Chinese culture and enhancing China's soft power, while also boosting foreign trade and economic cooperation. However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable trend of closures among CIs and Confucius Classes (CCs). Despite the rapid expansion that saw over 500 centers established worldwide within a decade (Li, 2025), 11 countries, including Canada, the USA, Australia, France, Sweden, Germany, Spain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland, have shut down some of their CIs and/or CCs (Gil, 2022). These countries are all developed nations in the Western world. The closures are often attributed to deteriorating relations between China and these countries due to trade and political disputes, as well as negative perceptions of China. In response, China revised its International Language and Culture Promotion (ILCP) strategy in mid-2020. It disbanded the Hanban and established two separate organizations: the Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF) and the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) (Li, 2025; Zhu & Li, 2024). This change reflects a trend towards decentralization in administration, politics, and finance. Despite the closures, by 2023, China had established and maintained 496 CIs and 757 CCs in over 160 countries, as reported on the official website of the CI (<https://ci.cn/en/xwzx/gg/10929b45-6376-4776-8d00-45f77b73c487>) on May 20th, 2024.

In contrast to developed countries, developing countries generally hold a more favorable view of China (Huang, 2023). For example, countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), due to their geographical proximity and cultural affinity, are more open to learning Chinese language and culture. According to the official website of the CI

(<https://ci.cn/en/qqwl/qqky>), Thailand (CIs: 17, CCs: 11), Indonesia (CIs: 9, CCs: 1), and Malaysia (CIs: 8, CCs: 1) lead the region in the number of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms. Among these nations, Malaysia has been China's largest ASEAN trading partner since 2008. It has seen a trade volume of over US\$10 billion in recent years. With an expected annual growth rate of 8%, this figure is set to keep rising (Yeoh et al., 2018). Moreover, Malaysia stands out itself with a well-developed Chinese education system, featuring 63 Chinese independent secondary schools. Notably, the Chinese ethnic group accounts for 22.6% of Malaysia's total population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024), emphasizing the community's demographic significance in the country.

In Malaysia's mix of different ethnic groups, the Chinese community has a special place in how all these groups relate to each other. They interact in complex ways with other communities, while still holding onto their own distinct cultural traits within the country's diverse ethnic makeup (Lyu et al., 2024). These independent secondary schools, privately funded and owned by the Chinese community as non-profit institutions, are scattered across both East and West Malaysia, spanning urban and rural areas (Siah et al., 2015). Additionally, as highlighted by Chin et al. (2021) and Wong (2024), there is a growing trend of non-Chinese students seeking enrollment in Chinese national-type primary schools, known as Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina (SJKC). A report by the United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia (2020) indicates that the proportion of non-Chinese students in SJKCs surged from 11.84% in 2010 to 19.75% in 2020, reflecting a notable increase in cross-ethnic educational engagement in Chinese education.

The Chinese government has played a leading role in fostering cultural exchange between China and Malaysia, with CIs serving as key platforms to bridge cultural divides and promote language learning. The first CI established on a university campus in Malaysia was the Kongzi Institute at Universiti Malaya (UM) in 2009 (Yeoh et al., 2018). Following this, the second CI was launched in 2015 at SEGI University College, a private higher education institution. In 2019, two additional CIs were officially established at public universities namely Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP) and Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) (Ngu & Ngeow, 2021), while another two were set up in 2020 and 2024 at the University of Technology Sarawak and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, both private universities. Notably, many of these institutions are government-funded universities with predominantly Malay student populations, highlighting the diverse contexts in which CIs operate across Malaysia's educational landscape.

The growing recognition of Chinese education among diverse ethnic groups in Malaysia, coupled with the imperative to master the language for navigating multifaceted global challenges, highlights a critical need for context-specific qualitative study. Jiao and Qin (2023) have supported the idea that case studies are also crucial for empirically comprehending how a CI is established and run. Existing research gaps highlight the necessity of investigating regions where educational dynamics remain underexplored (Xia & Yang, 2018; Hrubý & Petrů, 2019; Ngu et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, the CI at UMS emerges as a pivotal case study, distinguished by its historical role as East Malaysia's first CI, unique demographic-institutional context, and relevance to Sino-Malaysian economic integration. Notably, East Malaysia has long been marginalized compared to its western counterpart, despite its cultural diversity and strategic position in regional development. By probing the perspectives of UMS's CI learners on Chinese language education, this study aims to illuminate the nuanced dynamics of cross-cultural learning in an overlooked region, insights that hold significance for stakeholders. To address these gaps, this study proposed the following three research objectives (RO):

- RO1: Explore Malaysian students' perceptions of Mandarin learning at the CI.
RO2: Investigate the outcomes of Mandarin learning on students' cross-cultural competence.
RO3: Explore how Mandarin education contributes to strengthening Malaysia-China ties.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Reflections on China's Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy via Confucius Institutes

The concept of soft power, introduced by Nye (2017), refers to the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercive means or material inducement. This term is intimately linked to CI projects initiated by the Chinese government. In the mid-2000s, Chinese officials embraced the idea of soft power, recognizing its utility in complementing China's ascent as a global power (Nye, 2017; Ngu & Ngeow, 2021). In response, the Chinese government launched extensive cultural diplomacy initiatives to enhance its soft power, with the establishment of CIs and CCs abroad standing as prominent examples of this strategy (Wang et al., 2021). The operation of CIs has been framed as a peaceful, voluntary approach to promoting national language and culture globally, serving to enhance China's soft power and cultural diplomacy. This approach is often referred to as the "CI Model", a framework of international cooperative education (Zhou, 2022). Unlike unilateral educational initiatives, China collaborates with foreign partners to establish CIs, leveraging the financial, human, and material resources of both sides (Ngu & Ngeow, 2021). This collaborative model aims to mutually advance the international spread of language and culture while fostering cross-cultural exchange, ultimately striving for a win-win outcome in global educational cooperation.

However, much of the discussion about China's soft power strategies presents a generalized view that overlooks smaller, individual aspects. These micro-narratives get overshadowed by a broader debate that is filled with political feelings, especially when people talk about CIs (Acquaye, 2020; Li et al., 2020; Lok et al., 2025). Such accounts often prioritize broad ideological framing over the specific realities of cultural exchange, neglecting the lived experiences of learners, educators, and local communities engaged with these initiatives. By reducing complex cultural diplomacy efforts to politicized tropes, this discourse risks overlooking the nuanced roles that CIs play in fostering educational collaboration and cross-cultural dialogue. Moreover, Chinese scholars are increasingly eager to critique the framework and role of CIs in disseminating Chinese culture (Li et al., 2020). The shutdowns of CIs illustrate the challenges China faces in its process of global integration, a phenomenon deeply rooted in the profound cultural disparities between China and the West (Wang et al., 2021). After more than a decade of development, a critical examination of their achievements has become imperative. Such an exploration is essential to a comprehensive assessment of CIs' relevance and impact. The present study, which focuses on the perspective of Malaysia, a developing nation, aims to derive insights from the CI at UMS. These insights are intended to inform the development of more effective cultural diplomacy strategies.

2.2 Chinese as a Global Language

Language, as a cultural symbol, facilitates mutual cultural understanding when used in communication and negotiation. This idea is reflected in Beckerman's (1956) theory of "Spirit Distance" in international trade, which highlights the role of linguistic and cultural affinity in bridging divides. Establishing organizations like CIs has proven an effective means to overcome language barriers, providing structured platforms for cross-cultural learning. As China emerges as the world's second-largest economy (Jiao & Qin, 2023), proficiency in Chinese has become increasingly valuable, giving more opportunities across diverse sectors from trade and technology to education and diplomacy. Learning Mandarin Chinese can be understood through Kachru's three concentric circles model (Kachru, 1989), which was initially designed for English.

Based on Goh (2017), the inner circle includes mainland China and Taiwan Province, where Mandarin Chinese functions as the dominant societal language and unifies communication. The outer circle consists of overseas Chinese communities, such as in Singapore and Malaysia,

where Mandarin is used as a lingua franca and spread through education. In these countries, Chinese education is managed by government ministries or supported by local Chinese community organizations, focusing on transmitting Chinese culture and values. Malaysia stands out for its well-developed Chinese language education system. The expanding circle includes regions like Japan, South Korea, North America, and Europe, where Mandarin Chinese is taught as a foreign language due to its importance in commerce, trade, and culture. The spread of Mandarin in the outer and expanding Circles is supported by China's "going out" strategy, and the establishment of CIs and CCs.

Given that, the global spread of Mandarin embodies a synergy of cultural diplomacy, economic pragmatism, and linguistic adaptation. Through frameworks like Kachru's model, it becomes evident that language acts not just as a communicative tool but as a dynamic construct, shaped by state policies and local needs alike, to foster connection in an increasingly interdependent world. This evolution reinforces the idea that linguistic exchange, when anchored in mutual benefit, can serve as a cornerstone for sustainable cross-cultural engagement.

2.3 Relevant Studies on Confucius Institutes

Several studies have explored related contexts for revealing a complex landscape of successes, challenges, and areas for improvement. The findings derived from western perspectives, Cáceres-Lorenzo (2015) demonstrated that bilingual students tend to perform better and utilize more effective learning strategies in the context of the Young Chinese Test 2-A1 (YCT 2-A1) at the Spanish CI. This suggests that linguistic background may play significant roles in language acquisition and should be considered in educational programming. Zhu and Li (2024) examined the Manchester CI and found that despite significant governance changes over 16 years, the local impact on overseas CIs has been minimal and highly context-dependent. This indicates that while structural and procedural changes at the top level can increase autonomy and power for CIs and universities, their effectiveness at the local level is influenced by specific regional dynamics. This stresses the need for tailored approaches that consider local contexts. Du (2023) found that an increasing number of local German Chinese teachers are participating in training programs. These training sessions, organized by CIs, are crucial for enhancing their teaching skills. However, many local Chinese teachers lack systematic training in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Given the complexities of local Chinese teaching, these teachers face numerous challenges. They hope to improve their practical teaching abilities through targeted and effective training. CIs in Germany are working to develop training programs that meet these local needs. Chen (2024) surveyed 241 students and interviewed two to examine what drives satisfaction with online Chinese classes at five Hungarian CIs after COVID-19 forced instruction online. Five factors, such as engagement/interaction, technical problems, preferred learning modes, instructional design, and assessment/feedback were found to shape satisfaction. Students remain strongly attached to face-to-face classes, reporting reduced motivation and interaction online and citing platform-related technical issues. Nevertheless, they praised their teachers' responsiveness and overall performance in the virtual setting.

When it comes to the non-Western contexts, Keimetswe (2023) found that the CI at the University of Botswana have helped dispel negative perceptions of China among students. However, their impact remains limited to this specific demographic, suggesting a need for broader outreach to maximize their influence. Nur Mutia and de Archellie (2023) noted that while CIs in Indonesia signify a shift towards increased dialogue and cooperation with China, their activities are often exclusive and do not widely showcase Chinese culture. The closures of CIs in other countries due to propaganda concerns further complicate their image and effectiveness. To foster mutually beneficial ties, Indonesia should evaluate CI effectiveness regionally and ensure that new CIs integrate local culture into their programs to avoid duplication and enhance their value and reach among Indonesians. However, the case in Vietnam is different, Selezneva's (2021) research suggests that the CI in Vietnam plays a limited role in promoting Chinese language and culture. The institute at Hanoi University lacks sufficient human resources and its courses and activities are

infrequent and receive little media coverage. Vietnamese students prefer government or private funding over CI grants. Vietnam mainly meets its need for Chinese-speaking specialists through cooperation with Chinese higher education institutions near the border. In Thailand, Zhou (2021) noted that while China uses CIs to share its culture and build ties with the Thai public, these efforts have not deeply resonated. Over the past decade, Thailand's mainstream media has largely ignored CIs and their events. This may be due to the deep integration of Chinese culture into Thai society and the adoption of Chinese practices by Thailand. The Thai public is not particularly drawn to cultural displays, and CI activities are indistinguishable from existing Chinese department activities. Some Thai institutions are reluctant to fund CI programs. Chinese volunteers face challenges in communicating effectively with locals, and cultural differences have caused friction.

The studies reviewed reveal a multifaceted landscape regarding the effectiveness and impact of CIs across different regions, highlighting both successes and challenges. Essentially, CIs must shift from a one-directional "cultural export" model to a "localized co-creation" model, as suggested by Indonesian scholars through "culturally integrated" programs and Botswana's community-targeted strategies (which extend beyond student populations to include the wider community to broaden their influence). These imply that embedding language education in local social needs can help cross-cultural dialogue and achieve genuine mutual understanding.

2.4 Theoretical Framework: Constructivism in International Relations

The constructivism is adopted as the theoretical framework for this study due to its ability to illuminate the operational mechanisms of cultural diplomacy. Within international relations theory, constructivism posits that ideas, norms, identities, and social interactions are central to shaping state behavior and the dynamics of the international system (Adler, 2013; Choi, 2015; McCourt, 2016). In contrast to realism, it emphasizes the role of shared values and collective norms in guiding state interactions and shaping global order (Hopf, 1998), highlighting that international relations are not solely driven by fixed power structures but are co-constructed through mutual understandings, cultural contexts, and normative frameworks developed collectively by states and actors over time (Wendt, 1995).

Within constructivism, norms and identities emerge as key concepts for understanding the behavior of individuals and states in the international arena. Norms, which are defined as shared expectations, rules, and standards of conduct that shape the actions of individuals, groups, and states, are not static; rather, they evolve through ongoing social interactions and negotiations among actors (Hofferberth & Weber, 2015). Meanwhile, identities refer to how individuals, groups, and states define themselves and perceive others. These identities are subject to change through different interactions, perceptions, and shared narratives, and are influenced by factors such as a state's history, culture, political system, and external environments. They play a critical role in shaping a state's foreign policy and its engagements with other states (Magam, 2022).

Constructivism also challenges the traditional view of international institutions as mere tools of powerful states, instead emphasizing their capacity to shape state behavior by promoting specific norms and values. Educational and cultural institutions like CIs, which often serve as vehicles for cultural diplomacy, aim to foster positive impressions of a nation among foreign publics. By exposing citizens of other countries to a relatable, humanized representation of the nation, such institutions seek to cultivate a sense of the state's identity. In this case, like China, in foreign audiences. States increasingly leverage this form of constructivist paradigm to build relationships rooted in shared norms and values, recognizing that foreign citizens will interpret these cultural and educational initiatives through their own lenses. This approach to diplomacy prioritizes dialogue, mutual understanding, and the creation of common ground, reflecting the constructivist emphasis on dynamic, socially constructed engagement (Fassihi et al., 2022).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design focused on the CI at UMS, the first CI in East Malaysia. The case study approach is chosen for its ability to deeply explore the lived experiences and perspectives of students enrolled in CI courses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By centering on a single CI, the design enables a focused investigation of local dynamics, including student motivations, perceptions of Chinese language and culture, and the institute's role in shaping cross-cultural attitudes within the unique sociocultural context of East Malaysia. This design prioritizes depth over breadth, leveraging detailed, context-rich data to uncover insights that may not emerge from broader quantitative approaches. This study adheres to rigorous ethical guidelines to protect participant rights and ensure integrity. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was sought and obtained from relevant sectors at UMS. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were provided with clear information about the study's purpose, data usage, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To safeguard anonymity, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and all identifying details were redacted from transcripts and analysis. Additionally, the study avoids leading questions during interviews to prevent bias, ensuring participants' perspectives are represented authentically.

3.2 Sampling Technique

The study aimed to explore perspectives from CI students and management directors regarding Chinese language learning at UMS's CI. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants, targeting CI management directors and students currently enrolled in CI courses at UMS. This ensured that participants had direct experience with the institute's programs, making their insights relevant (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Student eligibility criteria included current enrollment in at least one CI course and willingness to participate in an interview. Given that the data collection period coincided with festivals and semester breaks, the final sample comprised three third-year student participants (SP1, SP2, SP3), selected based on availability and volunteer participation. Interviews with students were conducted via Microsoft Teams in 2025 from April to May, lasting 29–35 minutes, and focused on perceptions of CI programs and their impacts on cross-cultural competence.

As for CI management directors, UMS's CI is co-led by two management directors: a Chinese director from the partner university in China and a foreign director from UMS. The Chinese side provides teaching materials, instructors and a resident administrator. The Malaysian side, represented by a UMS faculty member appointed as the foreign director, supplies the infrastructure such as classrooms, facilities and local connections and oversees daily operations (Fu, 2022). Approval to interview both directors was obtained before the interviews were conducted. The interview with Chinese director (CD) was conducted in person at the office in December 2024, lasting approximately 30 minutes. During this session, interviewers were only permitted to take handwritten notes, as recording was not allowed. The interview with Malaysian director (MD) was conducted via WhatsApp in July 2025; MD took a few days to respond to the questions.

3.3 Instrument

The primary data-collection instrument is a semi-structured interview protocol designed to explore students' and directors' experiences of learning and teaching Chinese within the CI. The protocol comprises open-ended questions organized around key topics for participants: (1) exploring perceptions of Mandarin learning at the CI (e.g., encompassing learning experience, language development, teacher-student interaction, etc.); and (2) investigating the outcomes of

Mandarin learning on students' cross-cultural competence (e.g., cultural awareness, cross-cultural communication, future perspectives). The protocol allows for flexibility, interviewers can probe for deeper explanations or add follow-up questions based on participants' responses, ensuring rich, detailed data. Following its review and approval by the SKIM SEED MONEY PPIB committee, the instrument was subjected to expert validation. Three experts assessed its content validity to confirm that the items accurately captured the intended constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Face validity was then established through a pilot test with non-participants who were identical to the actual participants, refining clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness while eliminating bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.4 Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

Data collection occurred between December 2024 and July 2025 through one-on-one interviews, utilizing different methods: online via Microsoft Teams for all student participants, an in-person visit for CD, and the online WhatsApp method for MD. For student interviews, conducted in both English and Malay, audio recording was done with the participants' consent; interviews with both CI management directors were conducted in English. All interviews were later transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were cross-checked for accuracy by the research team to minimize errors and then sent back to each corresponding interviewee for confirmation.

For data analysis, the study employs thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a flexible method suited to identifying patterns and meanings in qualitative data. The analysis follows a six-step process: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) generating initial codes; (3) grouping codes into preliminary themes; (4) reviewing themes to ensure they align with the data and research objectives; (5) defining and naming five themes with clear descriptions; and (6) writing up the analysis, linking themes to the study's theoretical framework (constructivism) and existing literature on relevant topics. To enhance rigor, the research team engaged in peer debriefing, discussing codes and themes collectively to reduce researcher bias and member checking, where participants reviewed summaries of their interviews to confirm accuracy.

4.0 FINDINGS

This findings from five qualitative interviews exploring the perceptions and outcomes of Mandarin learning at UMS's CI. Grounded in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the study mainly focuses on how Mandarin learning through the CI shapes cross-cultural competence and contributes to Malaysia-China ties.

4.1 Student Participants' Perspectives

Participants (SP1, SP2, SP3) were third-year UMS students with varied motivations and outcomes, providing rich insights into CI's role as a cultural-linguistic bridge.

(a) Mixed Motivations (Career/Interest)

Learners' motivations for studying Mandarin at CI are diverse, ranging from extrinsic career goals to intrinsic cognitive challenges, and these motivations directly shape their engagement with the language.

For SP3, motivation was explicitly tied to job prospects, as she explained, "*My sister also, dia selalu cakap if you take Mandarin, you punya peluang tu lagi besar [My sister always said if you take Mandarin, your opportunities are bigger]*", a sentiment reinforced by her ability to use Mandarin in part-time work, where "*customers could understand me when I spoke about prices*". This aligns with instrumental motivation, where language is viewed as a tool for professional advancement.

In contrast, SP2 framed learning as a cognitive challenge: “*I just want to challenge myself... make my brain work more and don't want it to be lazy*”, a form of intrinsic motivation unrelated to cultural or career interests.

Meanwhile, SP1 represented a transitional shift, moving from “*Previously in PPIB I just come to class for the sake of credit hours*” to later committing to CI to “*master another language*” for future work in China.

These divergent motivations highlight the need for CI to tailor its messaging and offerings to appeal to both practical and personal growth-oriented learners.

(b) Contextual Pedagogy Effectiveness

Participants consistently emphasized the impact of teacher background on learning outcomes, with a clear tension between the benefits of local versus native instructors.

SP1 strongly preferred localized teaching, noting, “*My teacher was a local Sabahan from PPIB... I really enjoyed her classes and I really understood what was learning*”, attributing this to cultural proximity and shared linguistic context.

Conversely, SP3 valued native instructors for technical precision: “*Our teacher banyak tunjuk video and audio... Jin Jin... her pronunciation is excellent [Jin Jin's pronunciation was excellent, and she taught us with videos and audio]*”, a preference echoed in her improved listening skills. However, she also noted that “*we spoke mixed languages in class*” (Mandarin and English), suggesting that native instructors must balance linguistic rigor with L1 (English/Malay) support to avoid alienating learners.

For SP2, the effectiveness of instruction depended on individual attention: “*Miss Jin... she teach us one by one*”, highlighting that small-class settings, regardless of teacher origin, enhanced learning.

(c) Limited Immersive Cultural Engagement

A striking finding across all participants was the limited depth of cross-cultural learning in non-immersive settings, with cultural knowledge remaining superficial and tied primarily to language mechanics.

SP1 bluntly assessed his progress: “*I gained extra knowledge maybe about 20-40%... if you want to experience the culture competence I think you need to experience it first like when you go and travel there*”, emphasizing that classroom learning alone could not replicate lived experience.

SP3 gained cultural insights incidentally through textbooks and social interactions, such as learning “*We learn about foods like in Beijing food... maybe food and a little bit of family gathering*” and “*Raya Cina dengan kawan [celebrating Chinese New Year with friends]*”. However, she acknowledged that these experiences were limited: “*It is similar but only different celebrations*”.

SP2 reported no cultural learning at all, stating, “*Yes but not culture. More to the language*”, reflecting a curriculum prioritizing vocabulary over context.

Collectively, these accounts corroborate CI's need to integrate intentional cultural modules into language instruction.

(d) Productive Skill Acquisition Barriers

Participants' proficiency development was uneven, with receptive skills (listening, reading) advancing more readily than productive skills (speaking, writing), a gap shaped by confidence and real-world practice.

SP3 exemplified this dynamic: “*Listening and speaking improved because the teacher used videos and audio*”, and she applied these skills successfully in Sarawak: “*I go to Chinese*

shop (in Sarawak)... I try to speak in Mandarin about the price... the aunty can understand me". Her self-assessed 70% confidence in speaking reflects the link between practice and proficiency.

In contrast, SP1 struggled with productive skills due to tonal challenges: "when we speak to our local Chinese friends they still don't understand because our tone is wrong but they can guess but when we speak to international students from China, they will not understand at all", a barrier rooted in limited speaking practice.

SP2 remained at a basic level, using "Using only one word. Simple words rather than a whole conversation" outside class, citing time constraints but also a lack of confidence.

These disparities highlight the need for CI to prioritize speaking-focused activities, such as role-plays or peer exchanges, to bridge the receptive-productive divide.

(e) Needs for Program Enhancement

All participants offered actionable feedback to improve CI programs, focusing on curricular flexibility, extracurricular enrichment, and practical support.

SP1 emphasized the value of affordable materials, noting that CI's textbooks were "Yes. Quite cheap lah and useful [cheap and useful]", while SP2 praised the "There is one website that she use to teach us writing... Chinese Stroke order" as a tool for character mastery.

SP3 suggested "10-minute breaks in class" to enhance focus and advocated for "Activities outside class... macam mungkin melawat tempat macam tu... exchange students program [exchange student programs or visits to cultural sites]", experiences she believed would deepen both language and cultural learning.

Notably, participants prioritized experiential over theoretical improvements: SP1 and SP3 both linked better outcomes to real-world application, whether through part-time work (SP3) or travel (SP1). CI could thus enhance its impact by expanding beyond classroom instruction to include community engagement, language exchanges, and cultural workshops.

4.2 CI Management Directors' Perspectives

The excerpts below capture the perspectives of the Malaysian (MD) and Chinese (CD) director of the CI at UMS, highlighting their shared focus on Mandarin education, cultural exchange, and the strengthening of Malaysia-China relations.

(a) The Integrative Mission

The CI's core mission, shared by both management directors, is to use Mandarin education and cultural exchange to connect Malaysia and China by integrating language, culture, and diplomacy to foster mutual understanding and stronger bilateral ties.

MD: "focus on promoting Chinese language education and cultural exchange" and "fostering cultural exchange between Malaysia and China via cultural exchange activities and organizing visiting and learning tours for students and staffs UMS."

CD: "language is not something alone... it is for sure that if you can understand Chinese, you can understand Chinese culture" and "if they have learned or known Chinese, they will appreciate and strengthen the relationship."

(b) Pragmatic Drivers

Decision-making is guided by tangible factors, such as growing demand for Mandarin (from non-Chinese students), economic opportunities (trade, career benefits), and diplomatic milestones, which justify resource allocation and expansion.

MD: *"growing interest in Chinese language" and "Malaysia–China trade is growing. Knowing Mandarin gives Malaysians a competitive edge in jobs, negotiations, and cross-border ventures."*

CD: *"2024 is the 50th anniversary [of Malaysia-China relations]... Chinese is the biggest trading partner of Sabah" and "maybe they think it will benefit their career future to learn Chinese."*

(c) Multifaceted Challenges

The CI faces universal operational challenges (staff shortages, limited budgets/infrastructure) and context-specific pressures (security/ideological concerns in Malaysia; competition from other languages like Korean).

Within the theme of multifaceted challenges, shared resource constraints emerge as a critical hurdle for both the Malaysian and China-based Confucius Institute management. MD notes *"staffing issues due to the delay in visa approval and budget constraints"*; CD states, *"We don't have enough teachers... the second one, is the infrastructure, audio room... we don't have these equipment we need."*

Alongside these shared resource issues, distinct contextual pressures further shape the CI's operations. MD mentions *"national security and ideological concerns"*; CD, responding to interviewer's observation about Korean: *"many Malaysian students are interested in learning Korean... because of the influence of the K-pop..."*, CD states that *"this is a bit complicate, if you want to attract students to some language, maybe, you do something more."*

(d) Growth Through Community Collaboration

Expansion strategies prioritize partnerships (with schools, UMS, communities) and building local capacity (training teachers to handle diverse learners), ensuring sustainability by embedding the CI within Malaysian institutions.

MD: *"visit schools, agency and private company; understand their needs and try to collaborate with them. Collaborate with UMS students club, department and faculty for co-organizing cultural activities."*

CD: *"I organize the training class for the Chinese teachers, from the primary schools of Sabah... [training covers] how to teach Chinese to those whose language is not Chinese" and "we will continue with [online training]... Ms. Jin, she will teach these students."*

5.0 DISCUSSION

As for all student participants involved in the interviews, all of them approached Mandarin through different motivations. SP1 and SP3 were instrumentally motivated, aiming for career advancement that aligns with Liu's (2023) finding that employment prospects remain the dominant driver after one semester. By contrast, SP2's goal of "challenging the brain" reflects intrinsic motivation centered on personal growth, echoing Wen and Piao's (2020) observation that learners are primarily propelled by a desire for linguistic competence. Notably, these motivations shape learners' perceptions of program value, which aligns with Chen (2024), who notes that motivations are a factor influencing retention in Chinese learning at CIs. This suggests CIs should adopt a holistic approach to program design, highlighting career pathways for instrumental learners (e.g., industry partnerships, job fairs) and cognitive enrichment (e.g., problem-solving activities) for challenge-seekers. Such tailoring could enhance retention and satisfaction, addressing a key gap identified in language education research, the mismatch between program offerings and learner motivations.

Participants' divergent preferences for local versus native instructors emphasize the tension between cultural proximity and linguistic authenticity in language education. SP1's preference for local teachers ("PPIB teacher was a local Sabahan") indicates that instructors from the learner's cultural background better navigate contextual nuances, reducing anxiety and improving comprehension. In other words, this aligns with research on culturally responsive pedagogy, where shared backgrounds facilitate knowledge transfer. It also resonates with Hopf (1998), who notes that constructivism emphasizes how shared values play a key role in shaping knowledge and understanding. Additionally, this is consistent with Beckerman (1956), who emphasizes the role of linguistic and cultural affinity in bridging gaps. Conversely, SP3's appreciation for native instructors ("Jin Jin's pronunciation was excellent") reflects the value of authentic linguistic models, as native speakers often provide superior input on phonetics and idiomatic usage. This duality suggests CI's pedagogical approach should move beyond a "local vs. native" binary to embrace collaborative teaching models, such as pairing local instructors (to contextualize language and culture) with native speakers (to refine pronunciation and fluency). The results align with Cáceres-Lorenzo (2015), who found that bilingual students more easily master additional languages. In Malaysia, most individuals speak at least two languages in daily life, enhancing their adaptability to language learning.

Besides that, foreign language teachers ought to emphasize suprasegmental practice, such as to help students develop pronunciation that others can easily understand. In contrast, sounding like a native speaker likely requires zeroing in on perfecting the accuracy of individual sounds (Saito, 2021). Such a model could minimize SP1's struggle with tonal accuracy (e.g., "Chinese students couldn't understand my tone") and SP3's need for both cultural relevance and linguistic precision. Additionally, training native instructors in cross-cultural communication, for example, using mixed-language instruction (as SP3 noted: "we spoke mixed languages in class") could bridge the gap between authenticity and accessibility. This highlights that teaching Chinese in foreign contexts demands greater effort, particularly in integrating local needs with authenticity (Du, 2023; Zhu & Li, 2024; Nur Mutia & de Archellie, 2023).

However, limited depth of cross-cultural learning has been found in non-immersive settings, with participants reporting only superficial cultural knowledge (a 20–40 % gain, per SP1) and relying on textbook content (e.g., "Beijing food and family gatherings," SP3). This aligns with Nur Mutia and de Archellie (2023), who found that many CI activities remain exclusive and fail to present Chinese culture to a broader audience. This emphasizes that true cultural competence requires not just "knowledge" (facts) but "skills" (interaction) and "attitudes" (openness), showing language mastery emerges through socially mediated activity. Liu (2023) found that prolonged study and active participation in Chinese-speaking communities significantly boost learners' engagement levels. The interactions created a community of practice, transforming abstract knowledge into embodied skill. SP2's admission that "teacher focused on language, not culture" further highlights this gap. However, constructivism shows that meaningful cross-cultural learning happens when people interact with the culture, not just study it from a distance (Wendt, 1995; Hofferberth & Weber, 2015). The participants' consensus that "you need to travel to China for real cultural competence" (SP1) stresses the limitations of classroom-based cultural learning. This supports that language is inherently cultural practice, and without immersive experiences, learners remain disconnected from the "lived culture" of native speakers. Therefore, interacting with Chinese locals, and a genuine enthusiasm for Chinese culture, can help students maintain their motivation despite culture shock and communication barriers in China (Keat & Ma, 2023). To address this, CI could integrate experiential cultural modules by employing virtual exchanges with Chinese students, workshops on traditional Chinese festivals like Chinese New Year (as SP3 experienced informally), or partnerships with local Chinese communities. Such activities

would move beyond textbooks to foster the “experiential learning” participants crave, strengthening cross-cultural ties through direct engagement.

The uneven development of language skills, with stronger receptive (listening, reading) than productive (speaking, writing) abilities, mirrors broader trends in second-language acquisition. SP3’s 70% confidence in speaking, tied to real-world practice (“spoke to customers”), illustrates that producing language (speaking/writing) reinforces learning more effectively than passive input. In contrast, SP1 and SP2’s hesitation to speak (“only one-word phrases,” SP2) reflects a lack of structured output opportunities in CI classes. This suggests CIs should prioritize speaking-focused activities, such as role-plays, peer dialogues, or community engagement (e.g., volunteering at Chinese-owned businesses, as SP3 did part-time). Jia (2019) likewise found that sustained, meaningful exchanges with native speakers heighten learners’ enthusiasm for Chinese, particularly when they are employed by Chinese firms. Such interventions could address the “tonal barrier” (SP1) and build confidence, transforming passive learners into active communicators. Additionally, incorporating formative assessments for speaking, rather than relying solely on written tests could incentivize practice and normalize errors as part of learning, reducing anxiety.

Participants’ recommendations, from 10-minute breaks during classes (SP3) to exchange programs (SP1), highlight a desire for holistic program design that balances structure with flexibility. Their focus on practical resources (e.g., “Chinese Stroke Order app,” SP2) and affordability (“cheap and useful textbooks”) aligns with that adult learners prioritize relevance, convenience, and experiential learning. CI’s potential to strengthen Malaysia-China ties lies in translating these insights into action, such as expanding extracurriculars (cultural workshops, exchange programs), refining teaching models (local-native collaboration), and integrating cultural content into language lessons. This aligns with Du (2023), who emphasizes enhancing practical teaching abilities through targeted and effective training in CIs. By doing so, CI could evolve from a language institute to a hub for cross-cultural exchange, where learners like SP3 not only “speak Mandarin” but “understand Chinese culture,” fostering mutual respect and collaboration. The findings that align with Keimetswe (2023) and Lok et al. (2025), whose study showed the CI dismantled foreign students’ negative stereotypes of China.

From the perspective of the CI management directors (MD and CD) at UMS, the findings jointly highlight a cohesive vision and strategic approach centered on Mandarin education as a multifaceted bridge (Zhou, 2022). At the core of this vision is the CI’s mission, to use Mandarin not as an isolated skill, but as a tool to connect languages, cultures, and nations. The Malaysian director emphasizes practical, hands-on exchange, such as student tours and cultural activities, to foster direct ties between Malaysia and China, while the Chinese director highlights Mandarin’s role as a carrier of culture, emphasizing how language inherently transmits traditions, idioms, and contextual meaning. Together, these perspectives position the CI as more than a language school; it serves as a diplomatic and cultural intermediary, justifying its role through its ability to deepen connections beyond mere linguistics (Ngu & Ngeow, 2021; Yeoh et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021). This mission is advanced by tangible, real-world drivers that ground the CI’s work in practical needs. In Malaysia, “growing interest in Chinese language” reflects organic demand, while economic incentives, such as Malaysia-China trade growth and Mandarin’s value as a “competitive edge” in jobs and negotiations, link language learning to tangible outcomes. This aligns with the findings of An (2019) and Yeoh et al. (2018), who note that Malaysia is among ASEAN’s largest countries in terms of trade and other social activities. Alternatively, diplomatic milestones, like the 50th anniversary of Malaysia-China relations (noted by Chinese director), further align the CI’s activities with broader bilateral progress by tying its efforts to national and community priorities.

To navigate distinct contextual pressures, both sides employ tailored strategies. In Malaysia, “national security and ideological concerns”, rooted in anxieties about foreign

influence require the CI to embed itself in local ecosystems. This aligns with findings by Acquaye (2020), Li et al. (2020) and Lok et al. (2025), who note that foreign countries have voiced concerns about CIs introducing external ideologies. Nevertheless, localization efforts via CIs can mitigate such anxieties by fostering conditions conducive to building communication channels. By co-organizing cultural activities with UMS departments, collaborating with schools (via UMS's CI), and prioritizing partner needs, the Malaysian side positions itself as a collaborative, locally grounded entity rather than an external force, building trust and easing suspicions. For the Chinese director, in addition to promoting Chinese language and culture to non-Chinese students, there is a need to develop appealing strategies to attract more students to study at UMS's CI. This urgency stems from the challenge of competing with K-pop-driven interest in Korean, which demands focused efforts to draw non-Chinese learners. Recognizing that "many Malaysian students [prefer] Korean," the team aims to "do something more", leveraging popular Chinese dramas, music, or digital media (mirroring K-pop's appeal) and offering interactive, youth-focused activities (e.g., pop culture workshops) to make Mandarin relevant and engaging. This cool reception arises because, though Chinese culture is deeply rooted in Malaysian society, its familiarity may diminish its attractiveness to these students (Goh, 2017; Lyu et al., 2024). Moreover, as Zhou (2021) notes, this mirrors the situation in Thailand, where students learning Chinese at CIs also exhibit similar tendencies due to deeply integrated cultural interactions.

Finally, growth strategies across both UMS's CI management directors emphasize sustainability through local integration. The Malaysian director prioritizes partnerships with schools, companies, and UMS to ensure activities align with community needs, navigating scrutiny through collaboration. This is in alignment with Selezneva's (2021) finding that have shown that students are more inclined to choose private enterprises, local CIs could also collaborate with training institutions to promote Chinese language tests, thereby enhancing the practicality of Chinese teaching, among other possibilities. Meanwhile, the Chinese director focuses on teacher training to address a critical gap, 80–90% of students in Sabah's Chinese schools are non-Chinese, yet teachers lack skills to teach them. This highlight of insufficient human resources aligns with Selezneva's (2021) findings. Notably, the need for such training is underscored by growing demand for Chinese language learning among non-Chinese students, a trend supported by Chin et al. (2021), Wong (2024), and a 2020 report from the United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia. This is further confirmed by Hicham et al. (2025), whose recommendations include strengthening curriculum development, refining course descriptions, and enhancing teacher training to more seamlessly integrate culture-focused lessons into EFL teaching. This will ensure that equal emphasis is placed on all language skills and every dimension of intercultural communicative competence. By building local capacity and engaging stakeholders, the CI avoids over-reliance on external resources, fostering long-term viability.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The analysis of the three participants' experiences reveals five overarching themes that collectively illuminate the complexities of cross-cultural Mandarin learning at UMS's CI. These themes rooted in motivation, pedagogy, cultural cognition, skill development, and program enhancement, offer critical insights into how CI can better align its offerings with learners' needs while fostering meaningful Malaysia-China ties. Overall, the analysis reveals several overarching insights from student participants: first, students' motivations for learning Mandarin at CI are diverse, ranging from career prospects to cognitive challenge and transitional shifts from academic obligation to professional goals. Second, pedagogical experiences are shaped by teacher background, local instructors (e.g., PPIB's Sabahan lecturers) foster better comprehension due to cultural proximity, while the native Chinese

teacher at CI excel in pronunciation but sometimes struggle with contextual relevance. Third, cross-cultural competence remains limited, with students gaining only 20–40% more cultural knowledge through textbooks and casual interactions, highlighting a critical gap between linguistic skill and immersive cultural understanding. By incorporating the recommendations outlined, CIs will be better positioned to empower Malaysian students to engage meaningfully with the Chinese language and culture. This, in turn, strengthens their core mission of fostering cross-national connections through authentic cultural interactions, creating a more robust bridge between nations rooted in mutual understanding and shared learning.

Moreover, a combined analysis of the four themes underscores that the CI functions as a strategic intermediary between Malaysia and China. By navigating the interplay of its integrative mission, pragmatic drivers, multifaceted challenges, and growth through collaboration, the CI serves as a dynamic link that facilitates not only language and cultural exchange but also deeper engagement between the two nations, translating shared goals into tangible interactions that strengthen bilateral ties. Both CI directors at UMS converge on the belief that Mandarin is more than a language, it is a cultural and diplomatic tool, as seen in their focus on integrating language with culture to reduce misunderstandings. This framing helps position the CI as a neutral bridge, even amid scrutiny. Strategic priorities are grounded in real-world drivers: rising demand from non-Chinese students (in Sabah's schools) and economic incentives (China as Sabah's top trading partner) make Mandarin education relevant beyond cultural goals. This practicality is key to justifying the CI's role, particularly in contexts marked by challenges such as ideological concerns (as in Malaysia) or competition from other language-learning initiatives, for example, the Korean language programs offered through UMS's language courses. Challenges are both shared (staffing, resources) and contextually distinct, requiring adaptive solutions: the Malaysian side focuses on partnerships to navigate local sensitivities, while the China-based team prioritizes teacher training to address capacity gaps. The CI's work across both directors reflects a unified mission with contextual flexibility, using Mandarin to strengthen Malaysia-China relations, while adapting strategies to local needs, drivers, and constraints.

The innovation of the current study lies in its focus on the first CI in East Malaysia at UMS, addressing a critical gap in research on understudied regional contexts, and its holistic integration of perspectives from both students and management directors, offering a multidimensional view of CI operations that reveals alignment and tensions between learner needs and institutional priorities. This contextualized analysis, set within Malaysia's unique multilingual landscape, also innovates by highlighting adaptations for non-Chinese, bilingual learners, moving beyond generic discussions of Chinese language education. Its significance is also multifold. Theoretically, it enriches constructivist by demonstrating how cultural proximity and social interactions shape learning in Southeast Asian CI settings; practically, it provides actionable insights for educators and administrators to refine curricula, adopt collaborative teaching models, and address skill gaps, enhancing CI effectiveness in diverse contexts; and globally, it gives a blueprint for studying underresearched CI sites, contributing to broader understanding of regional variations in Chinese language learning and cultural diplomacy.

However, it should be acknowledged that this study has several limitations. First, the use of purposive sampling as the sampling method may introduce bias and restrict generalizability. Additionally, as a small-scale case study focusing solely on one CI in Malaysia with all participants drawn from this single institution, the results cannot be widely generalized, as the selected sample size is insufficient to represent the broader population. Future studies could adopt alternative sampling methods to include participants from other CIs in Malaysia, facilitating comparisons of perceptions toward Chinese language teaching and learning across diverse groups. Second, this study is limited to investigating participants' perceptions of

Chinese language teaching and learning at UMS's CI; other relevant variables, such as students' family backgrounds, academic achievements, and individual differences (e.g., psychological, learning strategies) were not addressed. These factors could be explored in future research. Lastly, potential biases may exist in data collection and interpretation due to the researcher's subjectivity and cultural background. Despite these limitations, the study's findings remain valuable for Chinese language teaching and learning in foreign contexts through CIs. They provide insights for educators on how to refine teaching schemes and strategies, enabling CI teachers to enhance their instruction by incorporating key factors into their lesson plans, ultimately helping students master Chinese more effectively.

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