

# The Franco–Chinese Institute of Paris as an Example of the Learning Culture of Mandarin Chinese Learners in Chinese Schools in France

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## 1. Introduction

The teaching of Mandarin Chinese is a key cultural industry. Efforts in promoting this industry, domestically or abroad, should be based on a sound understanding of the learning culture of learners. In addition, Mandarin Chinese teachers should be aware of the fact that “teaching language is more about teaching culture.” Therefore, to achieve a win–win situation between teaching and learning, the learning culture of learners should first be understood. Learning culture is a complex and broad concept that involves both learning and cultural elements. Within this framework, successful learning not only depends on the individual-level factors on the part of the learner but also involves community participation and equality of opportunity (Jacobson, 1996).

Learning culture includes all aspects of learning, such as learning philosophy, learning attitude, learning style, learning content, learning system, learning approach, and learning habits, as well as the results accumulated through learning. Learning culture is also evident in a variety of learning phenomena, including intangible learning values and tangible learning behaviors. Learning culture forms as a result of learners interacting with their learning environment within a learning framework. Therefore, a positive learning culture is often developed on the premise that the community has modern learning concepts, attitudes, and behaviors.

This study explored the learning environment and various cultural problems that Mandarin Chinese learners face at overseas Chinese schools in France. It also discussed the background and present state of Mandarin Chinese teaching, the factors affecting the learning culture of Mandarin Chinese learners, and the new learning culture in such schools in France. In the future, Mandarin Chinese teachers and Mandarin Chinese teacher training units should be used as a reference to improve the quality of Mandarin Chinese teaching.

“Culture” should not be the sole focus of teaching (Valdes, 1986; Harrison, 1990; Byram et al., 1994); research should also focus on how teachers impart knowledge, how students learn, when students should ask questions, the culture of learning, the areas of use and the role of the materials in the curriculum, students’ native cultural

backgrounds, and the relative influence of these backgrounds on the target culture (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Learning culture plays a pivotal role in language teaching, and Mandarin Chinese teaching is no exception to this. Furthermore, learning culture is a key factor in the interactions between teachers and students in the classroom.

## **2. Background and General Context of Mandarin Chinese Teaching in the Franco-Chinese Institute of Paris**

The Franco–Chinese Institute of Paris is one of 20 overseas Chinese schools in France. This school was selected as a research object for two reasons: (1) the author taught Chinese in this school when studying abroad and (2) the school was founded in 1982 and, therefore, has been established for several decades. The school has a long history as a French Chinese school, the number of students at the school has steadily increased, and the school has a good reputation.

The school strengthened supervision of its academic affairs in 2000, increasing the level of detail in the school’s syllabus and teaching plans and adding rewards for students. The school also maintains contact with the students’ parents to ensure they know about their child’s learning status and to obtain their opinions and suggestions on their child’s Mandarin Chinese education.

The original site of the school in the 19th Arrondissement, north of Paris, was requisitioned by the city government and converted into a nursery. Therefore, in the 2009 school year, the Mandarin Chinese class of the Franco–Chinese Institute of Paris was moved to a private Catholic middle school, the Collège Bossuet Notre-Dame in the 10th Arrondissement of Paris. Many students from the Institute have studied at Bossuet Notre-Dame. The Asian students studying at the Institute are diligent, serious, and disciplined, which is one of the main reasons why the Collège Bossuet Notre-Dame allowed the Institute to use their facilities. The principals of the Collège Bossuet Notre-Dame, including Mr. Kaiser and Mr. Wion, provided full cooperation with the Mandarin Chinese classes and a favorable classroom environment. The students became more active in their studies after studying in the school.

## **3. Factors Affecting Learning Culture in French Chinese Schools**

### **(1) Chinese as a Second Language (CSL)**

The French Ministry of Education first established the post of Chinese Language

Superintendent in 2006 as a means of promoting Chinese language instruction in primary and secondary schools in France. Professor Joël Bellassen served as the first Chinese Language Superintendent. Professor Bellassen reported that the government's investment in Chinese learning, which involved incorporating word lists and teaching materials into curriculum to meet a public need for Chinese learning, reflects the French government's emphasis on the importance of Chinese language learning and education (Bellassen, 1995).

The popularity of CSL has increased although countries have closed numerous Confucius Institutes out of wariness of the Chinese government exporting ideologies. Because of these changes, Taiwan began to actively explore the international Mandarin Chinese teaching market in 2021. The Overseas Community Affairs Council guided Chinese schools in various countries in establishing Taiwanese Centers for Mandarin Learning. An initial 18 centers were established in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and several other countries in the hopes of promoting Mandarin Chinese learning. In 2021, 15 centers were successfully established in the United States, and a center was established in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France (Li, 2021). In April of 2022, France established a second Taiwanese Center for Mandarin Learning, contributing to the Taiwanese government's goal of establishing 100 Mandarin teaching centers in Europe and the United States (Wan & Zhang, 2022).

## (2) French culture

Young adults who are ethnically Chinese but were born and raised in France generally identify with France. These students often use expressions such as “we... in France.” With the exception of differences in appearance, these students' national identities are similar to those of other French students. Both ethnically Chinese students and other learners of Mandarin Chinese encounter cultural conflicts. For example, a common greeting in Chinese is “Have you eaten enough (吃飽了嗎)?” Many Mandarin students, particularly those that are not ethnically Chinese, may be confused by this greeting because they are not familiar with Chinese-derived culture. They may also be unfamiliar with the system of Chinese names, in which the surname is generally spoken first followed by the given name. Therefore, an individual named Guo Wei (郭偉) may be mistakenly called “Mr. Wei.” This may hinder communication. Furthermore, the logical system of Mandarin Chinese and French is different. Therefore, the characters, tones, intonations, and grammar of Mandarin may be difficult to understand for students who are not already familiar with Chinese. French students generally struggle most with the tones of Chinese. Different tones often impart different meanings, which can make

it easier for students to misunderstand Chinese phrases. For example, a student may mistake “80 yuan for a bowl of dumplings (水餃一碗八十塊)” for “80 yuan for a night of sleep (睡覺一晚八十塊)” because of their phonetic similarities. French culture may also affect Taiwanese teachers teaching in France. For example, some students may refer to their parents by their parents’ French name rather than “father” and “mother.” The teachers must understand that this an aspect of French culture rather than students demonstrating a lack of respect for their parents. This is not to say that the teachers should teach the students to refer to their parents as “father” and “mother;” most of the students would have already assimilated to French customs.

### (3) Changes in teaching and learning environments

The relocation of the Franco–Chinese Institute of Paris resulted in the emergence of a new learning culture. Changes in the teaching and learning environments are notable examples of the results of this new culture. The following table presents a comparison of the different teaching methods employed in the new and traditional learning cultures that respectively developed from the new and old environments.

Table 1. Different teaching methods employed in new and traditional learning cultures respectively developed from new and old environments

Objects of comparison	Traditional Mandarin Chinese teaching and learning cultures	New Mandarin Chinese teaching and learning cultures
Teaching location	Traditional classrooms in the 19th Arrondissement of Paris (blackboards and chalk provided)	Multimedia classrooms in the 10th Arrondissement of Paris
Teaching model	Teacher-centered, low student engagement	Student-centered, high student engagement
Teaching content	Mainly textbooks	Mainly textbooks and multimedia teaching materials
Teaching aids	Tape recorder, blackboard, chalk	Internet, multimedia, computers
Teaching activities	Few and regular	Rich and diverse
Teacher’s role	Single role of knowledge imparter	Multiple roles
Class size	Large classes (35–80 students)	Small classes (15–25 students)
Evaluation methods	Written tests, oral tests, classroom performance	Written tests, oral tests, classroom performance, computer teaching platform–assisted assessments
Extracurricular exercises	Few	Many and diverse
Teacher–student communication	Limited channels	Multiple channels

(4) Peer culture for ethnically Chinese and other students

Peers play an essential role in learners' lives. Numerous studies have indicated that peer relationships and friendships considerably affect a learner's ability to adjust to a school and academic performance.

(5) Learning experience in French schools

Many students who take Mandarin Chinese as an elective course in French schools report that Chinese culture courses offered in French schools and Mandarin Chinese schools have complementary learning effects. The diverse content in the curriculum of Mandarin Chinese schools can supplement potential deficiencies in Mandarin courses in French schools. French schools offer established courses and learning spaces, whereas Mandarin schools offer informal learning experiences that are more flexible.

(6) Family background

A student's family background includes their parents' region of origin and their family's socioeconomic status. The "Chinese Family Dynamics Survey" revealed that the influence of family socioeconomic status on individual educational achievement is higher than that of sex (Wu, 2007).

(7) Chinese-derived culture

Chinese-derived culture is deeply influenced by Confucianism. To prevent their traditional values from being overtaken by Western values, many ethnically Chinese families maintain a focus on traditional virtues, such as "honoring teachers and respecting their teaching (尊師重道)."

(8) Teacher learning experiences

Almost all of the Mandarin Chinese teachers who teach in the Franco-Chinese Institute of Paris are students from Taiwan or Mainland China who are studying in France. The teachers' learning experience is influenced by Chinese-derived culture. Most of the early teachers at the school adopted a teacher-based teaching model.

## (9) Teacher training

Before studying in France, the author of this study completed an intensive course within approximately 2 months and obtained a Teaching Chinese as a Second Language certification from the Taipei Language Institute. When studying in France, the author began teaching Mandarin Chinese in the Ile-de-France region near Paris. However, many teachers at the school had no teaching experience, and the only channel for teacher training was the Overseas Community Affairs Council.

## (10) Overseas teachers' experiences teaching in France

Mandarin teachers' experiences teaching in France are influenced by French culture. Understanding more about French culture can improve Mandarin teaching because it enables the teachers to gain a deeper understanding of how local students may respond to instruction. In addition, these teaching experiences can affect teachers' expectations for future Mandarin Chinese courses.

## (11) Teachers' and students' expectations for Mandarin Chinese courses

The students who take classes at the Mandarin Chinese centers generally have regular classes at French schools and must therefore take Mandarin classes on the weekend. Because the students may feel that they have sacrificed rest or entertainment time to take 3 hours of additional classes on Saturdays or Sundays, they may have different learning attitudes toward and expectations for the Mandarin Chinese courses. For example, the students may feel that the courses should be more relaxed and interesting. Moreover, some students may believe that learning Mandarin Chinese can enable them to obtain a good job in the future. These students would expect the courses to be practical and effective.

Student peer culture and student learning experiences in French schools are factors that influence students' expectations for Mandarin Chinese courses. Teacher expectations for the courses, however, are mostly influenced by previous teachers' experiences teaching in France and teacher training. If the gap between teachers' and students' expectations for Mandarin Chinese courses is too wide, teachers may become frustrated with teaching.

(12) Teacher–student interactions

Interactions between teachers and students include those in the classroom and on computer-based teaching platforms. When teachers and students interact in the classroom, their interactions are influenced by their expectations for the Mandarin Chinese courses. If teachers’ and students’ expectations are similar, their interactions are cohesive; if their expectations are not, the interactions may be negatively influenced.

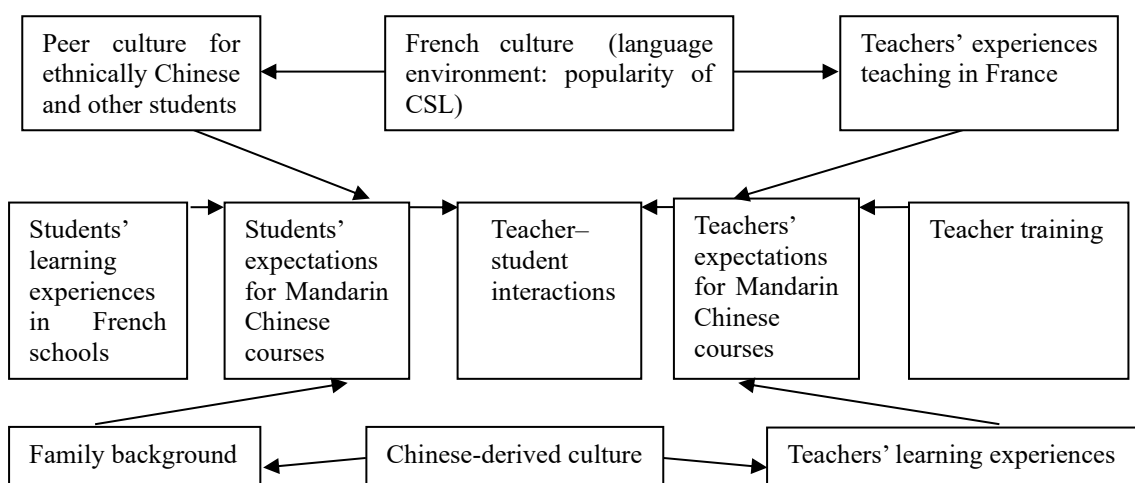


Figure 1 Factors affecting learning culture in French Chinese schools

#### 4. New Learning Culture of the Franco-Chinese Institute of Paris

Creating new learning cultures in schools is both the catalyst and the result of school education development. The four characteristics of the new learning culture of the Franco–Chinese Institute of Paris are listed in the following.

(1) Changes to the conceptualization of learning

In the new learning culture of the Franco–Chinese Institute of Paris, Mandarin Chinese learning becomes an aspect of daily life, occurring in both work and leisure. Learning is no longer limited to a specific time or place, and learning strategies and opportunities are diversified.

(2) New understanding of learning patterns

The learning styles within the school’s new learning culture include and consider formal, nonformal, and informal learning, with all of the styles being assigned equal



value.

### (3) Breakthroughs in the learning system

The new structure of the school's learning system emphasizes systematic thinking and comprehensive understanding. The system is more completely and flexibly able to meet individual lifelong learning needs or needs related to student exams. The school also encourages Mandarin Chinese learners to take Chinese-related certification exams.

### (4) Innovation in learning strategies

The focus of the school's new learning culture is innovation. Rather than imposing traditional limits on learning strategies, innovation and change are actively employed to increase Mandarin Chinese learners' interest and the effectiveness of the courses.

## 5. Conclusion

Through this article, the author proposes a new field of study to achieve a more in-depth understanding of Mandarin Chinese teaching: the learning cultures of Chinese schools in various countries. As indicated in this article, the Franco-Chinese Institute of Paris offers a unique learning culture. Unlike other Mandarin Chinese schools, the Institute does not specifically emphasize Chinese-derived or French learning culture. Effectively understanding and mastering the new learning cultures of Chinese schools can assist the government in promoting Mandarin Chinese overseas and facilitate communication between teachers and students. Furthermore, it can enable teachers to employ appropriate teaching methods and techniques with few resources.

At the International Summit on Mandarin Education, Xu Sijian (徐斯儉), Deputy Secretary-General of the National Security Council, and Tong Zhenyuan (童振源), Chairman of the Overseas Community Affairs Council, indicated that beginning in 2020, the National Security Council would integrate cross-ministerial resources to promote the Mandarin Education 2025 Plan, which focuses on improving global Mandarin education and developing a national team to promote Mandarin education. Both Taiwan and the United States consider learning Mandarin Chinese to be a strategy and a national security issue (Li, 2021). Taiwanese Centers for Mandarin Learning have been established in numerous European countries and the United States, demonstrating Taiwan's soft power, leading foreign elites to learn Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan, and promoting cross-cultural communication and exchange. The Overseas Community



Affairs Council will continue to encourage the establishment of Taiwanese Centers for Mandarin Learning in Europe and the United States. The culture, teaching, and promotion for Taiwanese Mandarin Chinese differs from those of Confucius Institutes because they demonstrate the freedom and democracy of Taiwan and the Taiwanese people's tolerance and respect for openness and diversity. This is indispensable for Mandarin Chinese learning.

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