

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE AT NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA, 2008 – 2022

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Abstract

Nigeria's relation with China has grown to certain level of significant proportions in the last two decades. Besides economic cooperation in the areas of trade, foreign direct investment and loans, educational cooperation has formed an important aspect of this relationship framework. The importance of education to national survival and development cannot be over-emphasized as the progress of any nation is predicted on the quality of her education and manpower development. As important as educational aspect of relations with China is, and has grown, in Nigeria under the framework of Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) it has received very little scholarly attention especially from international relations experts and international economic historians. Rather much scholarship has been concentrated on the economic-technological and political-diplomatic aspects of Nigeria-China relations. It is therefore this yearning gap that informed this study. Having adopted the constructivist theory as the most relevant frame of analysis, this study forages into the educational foundation of Nigeria-China relations with the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University as a case study. This study is aimed at bringing to light the key number of challenges facing the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University as well as the prospects. At the end, the study concludes by proffering some important recommendations that will be of immense help to the Institute. The study adopts the historical methodology in its analysis, and uses both secondary and primary sources of information.

Introduction

After the 1978 reform and opening-up policies, the Chinese scholarship programme took a new dimension through the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. The establishment of Chinese cultural centers in the 1980s was an early step in Beijing's cultural promotion activities. The first one was in Mauritius, where a Chinese cultural center was established in 1989. By 2009, there were seven, with plans to open more.¹ In 2004, the State Council established the Confucius Institutes with the approval of Hanban's proposed "Chinese Bridge Project" (Hanyu qiao), comprising of a package of measures to promote the speaking of Chinese language internationally.² The first Confucius Institute was established in Seoul, South Korea in November 2004.³

As China's global influence increases, more and more Nigerians are taking up Chinese language classes. The establishment of Confucius Institute is aimed at satisfying the need of Nigerian people to learn Chinese language, improve the understanding of Chinese language and culture, strengthen Sino-Nigeria exchanges and cooperation of education and culture, develop the friendship between the two countries and promote the development of multi-culture in the world together.⁴ The first Confucius Institute in Nigeria was established at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in 2008 and subsequently at the University of Lagos in 2009.⁵ The possibility of Nnamdi Azikiwe University getting affiliated with the Chinese Government in the development of a Confucius Institute in Nigeria was muted by late Mr. Ike Mbonu, the then Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), to Prof. Ilochi Okafor (SAN), the then Vice Chancellor of Nnamdi Azikiwe University in 2005. Mr. Mbonu explained that following the Nigeria-China relations which dated back to 1971 when the two countries established diplomatic relations, and the recent trends, and having himself travelled to China, he saw a great benefit for the University in such an affiliation. To him, such a relationship would create a viable opportunity for the traders of the South-East of Nigeria who had recently discovered the market potentials of China, especially the Onitsha, Nnewi and Aba traders. This would surely create great opportunity for Nigeria

– the largest black nation in the world, to learn the language of China – the most populous country and fastest growing economy in the world, and thus facilitate cultural and business exchanges.⁶

The ground work for the establishment of a Chinese language programme started in 2005 when Prof. Ilochi Okafor sent Prof. Sam Omenyi, through the advice of Mr. Mbonu, to an agricultural trade fare organized by the Chambers of Commerce at Golden Gate Hotel, Ikoyi, Lagos to interact with the visiting Chinese team. Thereafter, Mr. Mbonu through a directive from Prof. Ilochi Okafor took Prof. Sam Omenyi to Abuja and introduced him to Mr. Jiang Weiming, the Cultural Councilor in the Embassy of the Peoples Republic of China. The first visit was very fruitful. Subsequently, the Vice Chancellor informed Mr. Jiang of their desire to have a Confucius Institute established at Nnamdi Azikiwe University.

While the discussion was going on with the Chinese Embassy and in anticipation that Nnamdi Azikiwe University would get the programme as requested, Prof. Ilochi Okafor presented the proposal to the University Management and after approval, it was tendered to the senate. The senate discussed it at length and approved the establishment of a Chinese language programme. The Governing Council gave its own approval after it was presented to it. The senate sought for a related Department to domicile the programme. The Department of Modern European Languages was initially suggested.

In the course of time, the University of Lagos also indicated interest in having Chinese language programme established in Lagos and was making very strong efforts to get the attention of the Chinese Embassy. The incessant kidnapping cases reported in the media appeared to be an obstacle to Nnamdi Azikiwe University having the language programme at Awka. Mr. Jiang informed Prof. Ilochi Okafor that it was not safe to site the institute at Awka, but he was assured of the safety of the Chinese teachers and was invited to Awka to see things for himself. Mr. Jiang after some persuasive discussions, finally accepted to come to Awka to inspect the facilities and then to decide on whether to recommend the University to *Hanban* or not. He arrived with two other staff from the Chinese embassy for a one-day visit. They were given an accommodation at the defunct Tourist Garden Hotel, Awka. When they arrived at the campus, they were warmly received by the University Management. Their journey was smooth and no ugly incident was reported.⁷

The visiting team was taken round and shown a few places and then the rear wing of the then newly completed Utility Building which had been earlier decided to use for the Chinese language programme. Prof. Ilochi Okafor during the ensuing discussions expressed his gratitude for their visit and reiterated his sincere desire to have the programme established at Nnamdi Azikiwe University. He concluded his comments by assuring them that he was going to recommend to *Hanban* that the Chinese language programme be established at Nnamdi Azikiwe University.

Later in 2005, Mr. Jiang called Prof. Ilochi Okafor to inform him that *Hanban* had approved that Chinese language programme be established at Nnamdi Azikiwe University. The Chinese partner University was appointed as Xiamen University. Under this approval, a Chinese language Professor would be sent to prepare the ground for the take-off and sustenance of the Chinese language programme. On September 20, 2006, through the action of Mr. Jiang, Dr. Liu Guancai, an Associate Professor and expert in Chinese language, arrived at Nnamdi Azikiwe University and became the first Chinese language teacher with the responsibility to set up the Chinese language programme in the University. It was agreed that if China was to mount a programme in Chinese language studies, the host university would not rely solely on teachers from China. This therefore called for development of capacity in that area. For a start, Mr. Sunny Odinye (now Dr. Sunny Odinye, an Associate professor), the best student in Linguistics was nominated and through Mr. Jiang, he secured a 2005 scholarship to study Chinese Language and Culture at Beijing Foreign Studies University, China. He returned to Nnamdi Azikiwe University in 2007 as a Chinese teacher.

The Memorandum of Understanding was signed by Prof. Ilochi Okafor on behalf of Nnamdi Azikiwe University on January 24, 2007. In order to give the programme a proper landing, it was domiciled with

the Department of Igbo, African and Asian Studies. Prof. Liu was instrumental to the design of the curriculum for the Chinese Language degree, diploma and certificate courses, together with Prof. Onyekaonwu, Dr. Onwudiwe, Dr. Odinye and others. The opening ceremony was held on Friday March 7, 2008 and it recorded a huge success.⁸



Pic. 1: The commissioning of Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka 2008



Pic. 2: The Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka as taken in 2021

Theoretical Framework

This study requires a theoretical framework and hence, the Constructivist theory is evaluated and used. The Constructivist theory traces its roots to the pioneering works of Nicholas Onuf, Richard K. Ashley and Alexander Wendt.⁹ Constructivism primarily seeks to show how international relations (wherein foreign policy is anchored) is constructed. Constructivism holds that it is ideas and not realities that inform the decision of sovereign states. The theory attempts to explain how the historical and social formations of a country create ideas which are often interpreted as realities in international relations.¹⁰ Alexander Wendt, the most vocal enunciator of this theory, who in his work titled “*Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics*”, lays a theoretical groundwork upon which he challenges the neo-realist and neo-liberalist assumptions on the devotion to a crude method of materialism.¹¹ Constructivism considers international politics as a sphere of interaction which is shaped by the actor’s identities and practices and also influenced by constantly changing normative institutional structures. It maintains that states’ goals, either material or (objective goals) such as security and economic development or material or (subjective goals) such as international recognition and prestige are generated by their social corporate identities or how they view themselves or other actors in international politics. The basic assumption of the Constructivist theory includes: first, states are the principle units of analysis for international political theory; second, the key structures in the states system are inter-subjective rather than material; third, the identities of states and interests are constructed by social structures rather than given by human nature as neo-realists claim.¹²

Applying this theory to the study, China’s greatest strategic threat today is its national image. Its problem is more complex than whether or not its national image is good or bad, but hinges on a more

difficult puzzle which is China's image of herself and other nation's views of her are out of alignment.¹³ Therefore, the Chinese government seems to attribute its image problem to distorted overseas reports about China, which reflected in the four policy aims of China's public diplomacy: first, to form a desirable image of the state; second, to issue rebuttals to distorted overseas reports about China; third, to improve the international environment surrounding China; fourth, to influence the policy decisions of foreign countries.¹⁴

Perhaps China's best known branding exercise, or the most watched effort, is the Confucius Institute that has been rolled out at an incredible speed to more than 125 countries by December 2015. Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University is one of the many institutes representing China's image abroad. Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University not only strengthen educational and cultural exchange, it also promotes the development of multi-culturalism as well as to construct a harmonious world.¹⁵ This is evident through its myriads of scholarship to not only the students of Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, but also to the academia and students of other disciplines in the university through its New Chinese Study Plan Fellowship programme.

Challenges of Confucius Institute Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Confucius Institute Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka is facing real challenges which if properly addressed will no doubt set the institute as a pace-setter in Chinese language learning globally. Some of the challenges are:

First is in the area of infrastructure. This is because of the surging increase in the number of students and staff, thus making the classrooms less accommodating to them. To abate this challenge, as at the end of 2019, negotiations were on-going between Nnamdi Azikiwe University and *Hanban* on the establishment of a model Confucius Institute at Unizik. This will be as big as a village. There is only one of such institute in Africa which is at the University of Lusaka, Zambia. The problem of inadequate classrooms not only affect teaching and learning but also constitute a problem during HSK exams. Because of this, HSK exams are usually written at the university Multi-Purpose Hall and other faculty classrooms which is not supposed to be.

Second is the absence of a befitting auditorium. This made it difficult for the institute to host cultural activities during its cultural festivals. Although the university auditorium is used on a temporary basis, plans are on ground to build a larger auditorium.

Third is the problem of limited offices. These offices also serve as an extension of classrooms because in the offices, learning takes place and all learning equipment are also put in place and the teachers give the students close attention. So with the increase in the number of student enrollment and the resultant increase in the number of teachers, there is urgent need for more offices. Failure to address this will negatively affect teaching and learning.

Fourth is the problem of staff remuneration. Because of the introduction of Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS) in federal institutions, the living allowances of the Chinese teachers stopped coming. It was only reinstated in 2021. This had negatively affected some of the outreaches of Nnamdi Azikiwe University. For instance, Federal Polytechnic Oko has not been able to find a solution to the problem and as a result, it is facing the possibility of shutting down its classroom. This was because its teachers are not paid and the school had not been able to enroll them in IPPIS. It was for this same reason that the classroom at Federal College of Agriculture, Isiagu was shut down.

Fifth is the challenge of some classrooms not having solid support from their host institution. The classroom at Isiagu, for instance, was shut down partly because its Provost seems not to have the understanding of what the institute was all about. Due to this, it lacked adequate support from him. Similarly, in Oko, when Prof Godwin Onu was the Rector, one of the first things he did was to open a Confucius Institute classroom there in 2012 and supported it so much. But after he left office, the new Rector Engr. Dr. Francisca Nwafulugo doesn't know much about the institute and as a result she didn't

give it much support. However, it seems that most of the outreaches did not understand the long-term benefit of hosting the institute, hence their lack of support. They also look at what they will benefit from the institute.

Sixth is the problem of epileptic power supply. Sometimes the university's power team will become dysfunctional. This, negatively affects efficient lesson presentation because the teachers make use of multi-media display and power-point for teaching. Most times the classrooms become uncondusive for the students to stay because of hot weather condition. With this, the Air Conditioners become useless.

Seventh is the problem of Chinese teachers on campus not maximizing the opportunity of mingling with the local people and learning their culture. Due to security challenges in the state, they hardly leave the campus. They also leave on a planned date, especially when they want to go for shopping. This no doubt is inimical to cultural exchange.

Eight is the challenge from the Chinese government which includes scaling down of budgetary support of the institute because they want the institute to be self-supporting. But this doesn't mean total withdrawal of support. This might be as a result of the financial burden bore by the Chinese government in supporting Confucius Institutes around the world.¹⁶

Ninth is the lack of documentation for research and reference purposes. This constitutes a major challenge for research students as there are no data to lay hands on. Equally there are no official documents for one to use for research on the institute.

Tenth is the lack of official website which one can consult and obtain information on Confucius Institute Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. This equally constitutes a set-back to not only the researchers but also the institute because with time the institute will lose contact and proper record of activities that happened in the institute. Furthermore, there will be difficulty in communicating with the alumni of the institute.

Eleventh is the unwillingness of some of the graduate students to take up teaching job in Unizik Confucius Institute. The agreement of the Institute was that all graduate students must return to Nigeria and render services to the Institute. Most of the students never returned to the Institute as they remained in China teaching English Language or doing other things. This act kills the Institute's aim of indigenizing local manpower. Also related to this is the skepticism of the students learning Chinese language from the local teachers. Most of them would prefer learning under the Chinese teachers. It would usually take a lot of time to convince them that the local teachers are as good as the Chinese teachers.

Twelfth was the disappointment I had in my efforts to getting the Confucius Institute Director (Chinese) for an interview. On several occasions he unequivocally refused to give me audience. The reason for this, I believe, is best known to him. It was his failure to give me audience that made me to confer with the Deputy Director (Nigerian) who really was of immense help to me.

Finally is the fact that China has so many dialects and the Chinese teachers sent to Confucius Institute Nnamdi Azikiwe University are from different parts of China. The challenge is that what is learnt through the textbooks are in most cases different from what is spoken by the Chinese citizens especially when one goes on a field work maybe as a translator for the Chinese citizens in Nigeria. Under this circumstance, one may begin to wonder if they had been taught the real Chinese language.¹⁷

Prospects of Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

There are pool of factors that have ensured the steady rise of Confucius Institutes in Africa in general. Some of these factors includes: first was Africa's growing economic relationship with China. Second was the growing demand for overseas education among Africans. Third was the growing frustration and desperation to leave the country. Fourth was the increasing number of Chinese firms doing business

in Africa. Thus, the demand for locals who can communicate in the language calls for the establishment of Confucius Institutes which provides opportunities for learning of the language.¹⁸ This means that Confucius Institutes has a bright future in Africa *albeit* with some challenges. Until Africa begins to experience rapid economic growth and development, Confucius Institutes in Africa will hardly encounter the challenges it is facing in the West. Even though many centers have closed down in some Western countries, none has closed down in Africa. This is because Confucius Institute serves different purposes for the two regions. In Africa, for example, it is majorly geared toward solving some social problems like unemployment and youth restiveness.¹⁹ On the other hand, it is seen as international politics in the Western countries and they can make policies that might adversely affect the operation of the institute.

Nigeria being a third world country is still faced with high rate of poverty. With the emergence of China as the second largest economy in the world as well as a destination for cheaper goods and services, Nigeria sees China as an alternative trading partner to the Western developed economies.²⁰ This has led to influx of Chinese firms in different parts of Africa. With this influx of Chinese firms and the presence of Confucius Institutes in Nigeria, things have turned around for good for many Nigerians as many people have been alleviated from poverty through the knowledge of Chinese language. This has resulted to increasing interest among Nigerians to learn Chinese language. The fact remains that every Chinese firm that comes to Nigeria needs a local interpreter for effective communication with the locals. Given these huge benefits to Nigerians, it will be unthinkable for Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University to face the prospect of shutting down, although the Chinese government might decide to limit its commitment to it in the future. Therefore, so long as the Nigerian economy remains in a bad shape and the basic needs of the people remains unmet, Confucius Institute remains the saving grace of an average Nigerian.²¹

Despite the hope of Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University waxing stronger in the future, there are still fears for the institute due to some real challenges bedeviling its operations. If these challenges are not carefully addressed, Confucius Institute Nnamdi Azikiwe University might face the prospect of folding up. One of the challenges is the problem of staff remuneration caused by IPPIS. Due to this, there is difficulty getting the Chinese teachers enrolled on the national payment system. With this, there is fear that the number of Chinese teachers that would be sent to Nnamdi Azikiwe University in the future will be drastically reduced.

Another fear is the uncertainty of what will happen if the successive Vice Chancellors were not previously involved in the management of the institute prior to their appointment as Vice Chancellors. This calls for concern as regards the future of Confucius Institute Nnamdi Azikiwe University. Although the institute had been lucky that the two previous Vice Chancellors – Professors Boniface Egboka and Eberendu Ahaneku – were actively involved in its management prior to their elevation and appointment as Vice Chancellors, including the current Vice Chancellor, Professor Charles Esimone.

Also posing a challenge is Nnamdi Azikiwe University not receiving enough subventions from the federal government. Therefore there is fear that the university's capacity to support the institute will be limited. As a partnership venture, Nnamdi Azikiwe University has roles to play like provision of infrastructures and administrative support like vehicles. There is great fear that in the future, Unizik may not be able to fulfil these obligations in the MOU. Due to this, the institute has been compelled to increase the tuition fee of the students.

Also posing a challenge is the decreasing number of Chinese teachers sent from *Hanban*. To leverage this, Confucius Institute Nnamdi Azikiwe University has been advised by *Hanban* to recruit more local teachers for the institute. But the local teachers seem not willing to return to the institute to render their services. Therefore one begins to wonder what will happen if the number of teachers sent from China drastically reduced. There might not be local manpower to service the institute.

Finally there is fear if, in the future, there will be miss-understanding over directorship or management of the institute. This heavily depends on who is the Vice Chancellor. Also there is fear of politicization of the institute in the future. As it is the case with the center in Lagos, the management allows people who do not share in the vision of the institute or people who have no knowledge about Chinese language and culture, including *Hanban's* guidelines. In this case, they are usually concerned with what they will gain from it. In Unizik, successive Vice Chancellors might use the institute to reward certain persons that helped him to become the Vice Chancellor, and in this way he will be doing a great harm to the institute.²²

Therefore despite the good hopes of the institute, there are still real challenges that can mar the operations of the institute in the future. These challenges are not a result of national policy as in the West that led to many centers being shutdown, rather they emanates from the capacity of the host university supporting the institute. If these challenges are left unresolved, Confucius Institute Nnamdi Azikiwe University might face the possibility of being shut down.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

For over a decade, the Nigeria – China educational relations has been expanding in leaps and bounds with the establishment of Confucius Institutes across the country and has recorded tremendous successes most especially in Nnamdi Azikiwe University. In Nnamdi Azikiwe University, its areas of achievement includes intellectual development, increase in staff strength and local teachers, staff exchange programme, economic and human capital development, and infrastructural development as well as the establishment of outreaches.

Nevertheless, beyond these achievements lie some obvious and real challenges facing the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University. These challenges, no doubt, require urgent attention from the management, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, as well as their Chinese counterpart in order to better position the institute as the center of Chinese language learning in Nigeria. The challenges, grand as they appear, if not properly tackled could reverse most (if not all) of the achievements already recorded and the institute could face the possibility of being shut down in the nearest future. To avert this looming disaster that awaits the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, the study recommends as follows: first, the university must ensure that successive vice-chancellors are persons who have interest in Confucius Institute. When this happens, it will make the institute to be run by people who share in their vision and as well have a good knowledge about Chinese language and culture. This no doubt will prevent the politicization of the institute. This is a big plus for the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University because it has been shielded from this danger; second, on staff remuneration (Chinese staff), since the institute has some other sources of income such as the registration fee for new students, it can from there cater for the Chinese teachers, although the University is not under compulsion to do so; third, on epileptic power supply, the institute ought to be provided with one or two stand-by generator to be used when there is power failure; fourth, on the problem of limited offices, absence of befitting auditorium, and infrastructural deficit, the University should present to the Chinese government the need to establish a Model Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University. This when established will solve between sixty to seventy percent of the challenges faced by the institute. A Model Confucius Institute will be a grand structure that will house everything needed by the institute. It will be in form of a Chinese village within the University; fifth, on the unwillingness of some of the students to take up teaching Chinese language in the institute, the Chinese government should be advised to increase the duration of the grants given to the local Chinese teachers as this will make teaching of the language more attractive. Also the students should be sensitized on the existence of such an offer and opportunity; sixth, the institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University should create a functional website that will be regularly updated with accurate figures and information about its activities. This, no doubt, will help the students and researchers to obtain both facts and figures about the institute. Equally important is the need for the institute to have a functional library for documentation of books which can be used for research and reference purposes.

End note

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