

**ENCOUNTERING: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF CULTURAL
PRACTICE AND AFFECTIVE NEGOTIATION
AT THE CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE IN CABO VERDE**

Wang Xin

Confucius Institute

University of Cabo Verde

Praia, Cabo Verde

wang.xin@docente.unicv.edu.cv

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The article presents a unique study of China-Africa relations by offering a critical autoethnographic reflection of the experiences of the author as a Chinese language teacher (2021-2023) at the Confucius Institute (CI) in Cabo Verde between 2021 and 2023. The CI is explored as a space of encounter where macro-South-South relations are mediated through daily interactions. The study focuses on the dynamics of cultural practice and affective negotiation between Chinese teachers and Cabo Verdean students and staff. The article unveils a complex interplay of perception and identity when Cabo Verdeans negotiate with the CI, providing a nuanced view of cultural diplomacy within China and Africa.

Keywords: China and Africa relations, Cabo Verde, Confucius Institute, autoethnography, affective negotiation

Encontro: Uma autoetnografia da prática cultural e da negociação afetiva no Instituto Confúcio em Cabo Verde

O artigo apresenta um estudo singular sobre as relações China-África, oferecendo uma reflexão autoetnográfica crítica sobre as experiências da autora como professora de língua chinesa (2021-2023) no Instituto Confúcio (IC) em Cabo Verde, entre 2021 e 2023. O IC é explorado como um espaço de encontro onde as macro-relações Sul-Sul são mediadas através de interações quotidianas. O estudo centra-se nas dinâmicas da prática cultural e da negociação afetiva entre professores chineses e estudantes e funcionários cabo-verdianos. O artigo revela uma complexa interação entre percepção e identidade quando os cabo-verdianos negociam com o IC, proporcionando uma visão matizada da diplomacia cultural no contexto China-África.

Palavras-chave: relações China-África, Cabo Verde, Instituto Confúcio, autoetnografia, negociação afetiva

The wind from the Atlantic Ocean is always hot and salty in Praia, the capital city of Cabo Verde. It blows through the open windows of the Confucius Institute at the University of Cabo Verde (CI-UNICV), carrying with it the geographic isolation of the islands. Standing in front of the classroom in the fall of 2021, I looked out at eighteen young faces, my first students in the brand-new Chinese International Education undergraduate program funded by CI-UNICV. Two years later, in the summer of 2023, in the exact same room, the heat, the ocean, and the wind remained unchanged, indifferent to the shifting classroom landscape within. But only seven students were left sitting at their desks. When I again visited the classroom in the winter of 2024, their final year before graduation, only four students remained to prepare their final theses. Many had left the program: some had strategically changed their majors to fields with more immediate local utility; others had joined the diaspora, migrating to seek wage labor in Europe; and some had simply stopped coming to class by the demands of daily survival. Tellingly, this initial cohort was the first and only of the Chinese International Education program in Cabo Verde. According to the administrative requirements of the UNICV, a minimum enrollment of ten students is required to open any undergraduate course. After meeting that quota in 2021, from 2022 onward the program has consistently failed to recruit enough applicants to meet the university's criteria.

As a professor, those empty chairs felt like a personal and institutional defeat. But I soon realized that this tangible absence was an echo of something larger and structural. Grand geopolitical initiatives, whether packaged as win-win cooperation or soft power expansion, do not land on a blank slate. Instead, they clash with individual survival strategies, deep-seated local economic precarity, and the intense migratory pull of the Global North (Carling & Åkesson, 2009), all of which have been exacerbated in the post-pandemic era. To read the expressions of this encounter, the article proposes shifting attention away from state design and institutional coherence by posing a specific research question: can a precarious cultural diplomacy apparatus be sustained through the affective labor and improvisational practices of the frontline actors who inhabit it? By exploring the lived experiences of students, teachers, and local staff, this study demonstrates that the celebrated “Chinese heat” (汉语热) is an institutional illusion that fails to generate lasting socioeconomic influence within the precarious climate of Cape Verde.¹

¹ Chinese heat: The surge in Mandarin proficiency is less a grassroots movement than a state-orchestrated project, where linguistic acquisition is leveraged as a geopolitical instrument to consolidate influence within the host country's educational infrastructure.

Contemporary China-Africa relations were forged in the mid-twentieth century, rooted in the shared traumas of imperialism and a mutual pursuit of national sovereignty. Following the spirit of the 1955 Bandung Conference, China extended ideological solidarity and material support to African liberation movements (Sautman & Hairong, 2009). Cape Verde's connection to China is deeply embedded in this legacy. Long before the archipelago formally won independence from Portugal in 1975, the Chinese leadership established ties with Amílcar Cabral and the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cabo Verde (PAIGC) (Ferreira & Madeira, 2020). However, the turn of the millennium marked a drastic shift. With the launch of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, China pivoted from ideological brotherhood to a highly pragmatic, state-backed economic expansion (Bräutigam & Tang, 2009). Today, China's presence in Cape Verde is not only manifest through the state-owned enterprises that have reshaped the landscape of Praia, having built the Palace of Government, the National Stadium, and the university campus where my classroom was located, but also through the typical *Loja China*, the Chinese *baihuo* shops (Ferreira & Madeira, 2020). The majority of Chinese immigrants in Cabo Verde are small business owners who run local grocery stores and *baihuo* shops on the street corners since 1995 (Carling & Haugen, 2008). Macroeconomic studies demonstrate a strong correlation between increased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows from China to Africa and the opening of Confucius Institutes (Akhtaruzzaman et al., 2017). The CI operates within these concrete manifestations of foreign aid since the establishment of the first African Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi in 2005 (Wheeler, 2014). These institutes are frequently integrated into African higher education systems to build local capacity and internationalize universities (Kragelund & Hampwaye, 2015). From the perspective of the Chinese state, the CIs represent benign bridges for mutual understanding.

But as part of a network that has proliferated across the African continent and much beyond, such a rapid global expansion has thrust the CI into a contested discursive arena. In Western media and political discourse, CIs are overwhelmingly demonized as "Trojan horses" of the Chinese Communist Party, leading to mass closures across Europe and North America (Li, 2017). This geopolitical friction has dictated the direction of academic research. A critical review of the literature reveals a solid tendency in framing the CI almost exclusively as an instrument of Chinese soft power. Scholars routinely analyze CIs through the theoretical lens of "soft power," evaluating their effectiveness as tools of Chinese foreign policy in Africa (Krakowski, 2025; Martín & Elias, 2021; Neruchek, 2020; Ng, 2023; Procopio, 2015). This macro-political perspective is dominant, and this

body of literature structurally excludes African agency, framing host nations as passive recipients of Chinese cultural projection rather than active participants negotiating cultural exchanges (Homawoo & Conyers, 2021). In African contexts, the CI often operates as a space of culture and language without controversy, welcomed for its tangible resources (King, 2017). African students and institutions approach these spaces with pragmatism. The Chinese cultural offering is often met with what Repnikova (2022) terms “pragmatic enticement” in her study of CI in Ethiopia, where local actors leverage Chinese resources for their own upward mobility.

The academic literature on the CI is essentially binary, trapped between two distinct readings of its activity: on one side, the Western-centric macro-diplomacy view, which mainly focuses on geopolitical metrics; on the other side, academic literature produced by Chinese scholars about Teaching Chinese as a second language (Duan, 2017; Guo, 2018; Huang, 2025; Li, 2025; Wen, 2020). While the western view is often blind towards the social activities and inner function of the CI, the reduction of the institute’s work to pure pedagogy, by focusing on grammatical error analysis, tonal acquisition, teaching methods and standardized test pass rates, also deserved reflection and critique. Crucially, the article argues that both paradigms overlook the CI as a daily contact zone between people (Pratt, 1991).

The article fills this gap by foregrounding the affective dimensions of institutional life. Rather than viewing the CI as a policy abstraction, it approaches it as a fragile institutional assemblage continuously made and unmade through hope, the guilt of those who deliver promises they cannot keep, and an unequal distribution of the futures the institution promises. Drawing on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and autoethnographic immersion at UNICV, I introduce the term affective negotiation to capture the relational, asymmetrical, and often invisible management of emotion performed by actors confronted with the necessity to reconcile the promises of Chinese linguistic capital with the immediate structural precarity and urgencies of their host environment. This study demonstrates that the survival of cultural diplomacy relies not on macro-state design, but on the continuous processes of affective negotiation through which frontline actors navigate the micro-realities of institutional contraction.

Methodology

This research emerges from a fundamentally entangled position. I did not enter the CI of UNICV as a detached observer, but as a Chinese teacher on the frontline who graded student's performance, controlled access to scholarships, and embodied the ambitions and contradictions of Chinese cultural diplomacy in Africa. Traditional qualitative paradigms often demand that researchers minimize their presence, treating the self as a source of contamination to be transcended in the pursuit of scientific objectivity (Wall, 2006). In this study, such a demand would be epistemically dishonest because my body was already inscribed with political, institutional, and racial meaning before I ever opened a classroom door. It was this deep entanglement that made autoethnography a methodological necessity rather than an optional choice. Autoethnography challenges positivist science by acknowledging the complex link between the personal and the cultural (Wall, 2006). If the core mechanism of the daily operation of the CI is affective negotiation, understood as the relational management of hope, guilt, and anxiety across asymmetrical power relations, then a purely observational approach would structurally miss the internal emotional labor that constitutes that very mechanism (Wharton, 2009). Autoethnography "lets you use yourself to get to culture" (Pelias, 2003, p. 370), placing lived experience at the nexus of the structural and the interpersonal. The affective dissonance I experienced when facing an empty desk is more than personal testimony; it connects to the structural precarity of the institution and the students' migratory aspirations that quietly shape their reality.

The autoethnographic foundation of this study involved two CI sites in Africa. I was based at the CI of Cairo University in Egypt from 2019 to 2021 and at the CI of UNICV in Cabo Verde from 2021 to 2023, followed by a return for PhD research fieldwork between 2024 and 2025. Although the Cairo experience is not the primary subject of this article, it directly informs the analysis. Having taught in two structurally similar institutions in distinct African contexts allowed me to treat the Cabo Verdean case not as an isolated rarity, but as situated within a broader pattern of CI institutional life in African higher education. This comparative trajectory made me alert to what was specific to Cabo Verde rather than generic to the broader CI model.

The concept of affective negotiation did not arrive as a rigid theoretical framework brought into the field. Instead, it formed slowly through repeated returns to field notes and through the critical distance that accumulated once I was no longer employed by the institution. When writing in my journal about telling a

student that their scholarship chances were good despite a full quota, I did not view this as affective negotiation. To me, it was just a kindness or a practical decision. It was only during the subsequent process of analysis, when reading those entries against interview transcripts, enrollment figures, and my own sense of institutional complicity, that the pattern became visible.

Affective negotiation, as used here, refers to the intersubjective management of feeling through which the CI reproduces itself in the absence of the material conditions that would otherwise sustain it. The concept draws on Hochschild's (1983) account of emotional labor but is more precisely oriented by Ahmed's (2004) argument that affects do not reside in individuals but circulate between bodies, accumulating value through repetition. In the CI context, hope circulates this way, attaching to scholarships, language certificates, and futures the institution cannot reliably deliver and generating in those who administer these promises an obligation to manage what cannot be fulfilled and a guilt that accumulates when the structural limits become undeniable. Affective negotiation names the moment when that circulation is actively managed. They are its primary register, and to treat them as data is to read what is not said as evidence of how the institution reproduces itself.

Alongside autoethnographic reflection, this study draws on participant observation conducted across two distinct phases. During my teaching appointment from 2021 to 2023, observation was embedded in daily institutional life through my presence in classrooms, staff meetings, informal corridor conversations, and administrative encounters with university management. Because I was primarily operating as a teacher during this period, my data from these years consists of personal journals, pedagogical reflections, and lived experiences rather than systematic fieldwork logs. It was during the re-entry phase between 2024 and 2025, when I was no longer employed by the institution, that my observation shifted to an explicitly researcher-oriented mode. During these later periods, I began recording formal field notes daily, documenting institutional events alongside less tangible affective registers such as silences and absences. This transition from an insider teacher to a returning observer provided the critical distance necessary to analyze institutional dynamics that I had previously inhabited too closely to see clearly.

To supplement the autoethnographic and observational data, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants during my 2024-2025 fieldwork. This group included the four remaining students preparing their final theses in the Chinese International Education program, as well as two Cabo Verdean staff members affiliated with the CI UNICV. Reflecting the everyday

linguistic reality of the institution, the interviews were conducted in Chinese and supplemented with Cabo Verdean Creole where necessary. Each session lasted between forty-five minutes and one and a half hours. With the informed consent of all participants, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Through a thematic analysis informed by the theoretical frameworks of affective labor (Hardt, 1999; Hochschild, 1983), distributed hope (Hage, 2003), and capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2013), I read the transcripts to trace how specific patterns of affective investment, institutional improvisation, and migratory aspiration constitute the broader dynamics of affective negotiation. While the interview sample is small, it represents a complete census of the remaining cohort rather than a selective subset, as the program comprised only four active students at the time of my fieldwork. These findings are therefore analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable; they offer conceptual tools to illuminate CI dynamics elsewhere without claiming to represent the network in Africa as a whole.

This research was conducted during and after my employment at UNICV without home university sponsorship or formal review board oversight. Instead, the protocol followed the American Anthropological Association's (2012) ethical principles, prioritizing informed consent and protection within close-knit communities. Accordingly, all six interview participants provided written informed consent, having been fully briefed on the project's purpose and its publication contexts. The small size of the Praia CI community required a conservative anonymization strategy, as combinations of role and gender could easily identify participants (Nespor, 2000). Consequently, all interviewees appear under pseudonyms with their identifying details generalized. However, my own identity as a researcher-teacher remains transparent because my positionality and institutional complicity are central to the argument (Marcus, 1998). For other students and colleagues who were not formally interviewed, I use composite observations and generalized patterns to ensure privacy.

This study has several clear boundaries. The documented institutional dynamics are specific to Cabo Verde, where high emigration rates and a post-colonial Lusophone identity make the field distinct from larger African contexts. On a micro-level, my past role as a Chinese teacher created an unavoidable power asymmetry. Rather than assuming this authority could be entirely eliminated, I accounted for its influence by treating participant hesitations and deflections as active analytical indicators (Gal, 1991). Because this project is fundamentally an autoethnography grounded in my years of teaching and living experiences, the analysis inevitably privileges my own internal states over those of my interlocutors. To avoid making generalized assertions about their inner lives or

compromising the autoethnographic nature of this work, I treat the data from interlocutors not as unmediated phenomenological evidence but as situated reflections captured at a moment of transition. Then, their voices function as vital interpretive counterweights, read carefully through my own reflexive lens as an anthropologist to map the boundaries of the institution itself.

CI-UNICV

The road to Cidade Velha carves through a landscape of uncompromising desolation. Whether the rains bring a fleeting cloak of green, or the dry months return the earth to its lingering, rust-colored dust, the bedrock of Santiago Island remains stubbornly stark. As one drives toward Palmarejo Grande, the horizon is suddenly fractured by a massive, predominantly red architectural complex. This is the new main campus of the UNICV. It rises from the barren earth not as an organic extension of the local environment but as a deliberate spatial intervention. To the local eye, the campus might simply appear overwhelmingly modern, especially when juxtaposed against the neighboring Jean Piaget University or the scattered, older faculties of UNICV's past. But to me, a Chinese person whose entire higher education was formed within the spatial logic of mainland China, stepping onto the Palmarejo Grande campus elicited a visceral, almost disorienting sense of *déjà vu*. From the rigid layout of the administrative blocks to the calculated width of the boulevards and the uniform tiles underfoot, the effect was uncanny. It felt less like a local campus and more as if a generic Chinese provincial university had been sheared from its foundation and dropped, intact, onto Cape Verde.

This architectural jarring is more than a matter of taste; it is a geopolitical imposition that serves as the raw, physical site where my autoethnography takes shape. The new UNICV campus, occupying 11 hectares with a total construction area of nearly 30,000 square meters, was entirely funded by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce to accommodate over 5,000 students and faculty (MOFCOM, 2024). Constructed by the Longxin Construction Group beginning in June 2017, the project successfully passed the rigorous inspection of the MOFCOM Agency for International Economic Cooperation expert group and was officially handed over to the Cabo Verdean government on July 20, 2021 (MOFCOM, 2024). It stands as the largest single Chinese aid project in Cabo Verde since the two nations formally established diplomatic relations on April 25, 1976. The new campus, with its vast, echoing halls, was less a home for education programs and more of a hollow

monument. It stood as an imposing structural shell, waiting for a local reality that resisted its rigid geometry.

To understand the current situation of the CI-UNICV and its unique position in this research, I recognized that China's presence in Cabo Verde was concrete long before it was linguistic. Following the 1976 establishment of diplomatic ties, Chinese state-owned enterprises became the quiet architects of Praia's landscape. The National Assembly building was constructed in 1985, followed by the National Government Office Building in 1991, the National Library in 1999, and the National Auditorium in 2001 with the project with Jinan Fourth Construction Company, China Aquatic Products, Huawei, Beijing Sixth Construction, Hua Shan international company (Ferreira & Madeira, 2020; MOFCOM, 2024). Later infrastructural interventions included the Poilão Dam in 2006 by Liaoning International and the National Stadium in 2015, jointly developed by Huashan International and China Railway 14th Bureau (Ferreira & Madeira, 2020). Until 2011, the teaching of the Chinese language and the organized dissemination of Chinese culture in Cape Verde were absent. There were no schools, institutions, or private individuals bridging the linguistic gap.

The initial push to fill this linguistic gap did not come from top to bottom but from a grassroots effort by returning Cabo Verdean students who received a higher education degree in mainland China and Macau. In October 2011, the Cabo Verde-China Friendship Association (AMICACHI) was formally established, spearheaded by individuals like Mr. José, an early recipient of a Chinese government scholarship who subsequently secured a position in the Cabo Verdean Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Duan, 2017). AMICACHI's founders sought to facilitate the spread of Chinese culture, assist locals interested in the language, and, crucially, help a new generation navigate the complex bureaucracy of applying for scholarships to study in China (Huang, 2025). Operating with the official backing of both the Cabo Verdean Embassy in China and the Chinese Embassy in Cabo Verde, AMICACHI functioned largely through the volunteering of returnees (Ferreira & Madeira, 2020; MOFCOM, 2024). Even today, it sustains its daily operations with only one full-time employee, relying on internship agreements with local higher education institutions to maintain its services. This grassroots volunteer network functioned as an early, informal mechanism of affective negotiation within the field. Preceding official institutionalization, it was the first to shoulder and manage local youth's aspirations for transnational mobility at a micro-level.

AMICACHI's era of language instruction is vital for understanding the current situation within the CI. Between 2012 and 2015, AMICACHI was the pri-

mary force for Chinese teaching in the country, offering targeted culture and comprehensive language skills courses (Duan, 2017). However, following the establishment of a CI late 2015, AMICACHI ceased its language teaching operations to avoid redundancy. They pivoted entirely to cultural events, eventually opening a comprehensive China-Cabo Verde Exchange Center in 2024 in the Achada Santo António district during my stay, integrating a restaurant, cultural spaces, and meeting rooms.

On February 9, 2015, the Hanban signed an agreement with UNICV to establish a CI in partnership with Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (Wen, 2020).² By December 18, 2015, CI-UNICV was officially launched as the first of its kind in Cape Verde. The first non-credit language promotion classes began on January 25, 2016, followed by formal semester-based courses in March (Li, 2025). The rapid stabilization of the CI instilled deep confidence within the local educational bureaucracy. By October 2016, the Cabo Verdean Ministry of Education boldly proposed a “Five-Year Plan for the Promotion of Chinese in Cabo Verdean Secondary Schools,” and an official cooperation agreement was signed on May 9, 2017 (Guo, 2018). By September of that year, Chinese language classes were formally rolled out as an elective for 9th graders (the first year of secondary school) across 15 schools: nine in Praia (Santiago Island), two in Assomada (Santiago Island), and four in Mindelo (São Vicente Island). This agreement has been successfully renewed every five years, integrating an ever-growing number of schools into the CI’s orbit. The culmination of this institutional narrative arrived in October 2021, the exact same year that the Palmarejo Grande campus was completed and CI-UNICV launched its brand-new Chinese International Education undergraduate program (Huang, 2025). It was designed to train local Cabo Verdeans to become Chinese teachers themselves, completing a self-sustaining cycle of cultural reproduction.

However, as noted at the beginning of the article, the first cohort of eighteen dwindled to four, and since 2022, the “Chinese heat” generated by diplomatic agreements could not be sustained in the classroom. The students who left my classroom did not reject Chinese culture or Chinese language; they simply calculated that sitting in a classroom would not facilitate their survival or their migration to wage labor in Europe (Carling, 2002; Meintel, 2002).

² Formerly known as Hanban (the Office of Chinese Language Council International), the organization was rebranded in 2020 as the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC). This institutional restructuring signifies a strategic shift in China’s cultural diplomacy, moving away from a centralized, state-centric identity toward a rhetoric of “bilateral cooperation” and professionalized educational exchange within the global linguistic market.

The four students who stayed

Laura, Mica, Thais, and Andrew were the ones who stayed. I was responsible for teaching Chinese Grammar, widely considered the most difficult and demanding course in the curriculum but also the only one that ran continuously throughout their entire undergraduate degree. Because of this, I spent more time with them than anyone else in the CI. Our interactions quickly bled past the sterile boundaries of textbooks. We once spent a day acting as “Chinese journalists,” stepping out of the campus to interview Chinese immigrants running small stores in the center of Praia. On another occasion, we traveled to Cidade Velha, where they acted as tour guides for a day, introducing the history of Cabo Verde in Mandarin.

I remember the start of a semester in February 2023 when I walked into the classroom and immediately noticed that the affective tone of the room was a bit off. Laura is a relatively extroverted girl, and her emotions are always written plainly on her face. I did not think too much about it at first and prepared to start the lesson. But after I asked a few basic questions and was met with silence, I stopped. I closed my textbook and looked at them and asked what was really going on. Laura exchanged glances with the others before finally looking back at me. “Teacher,” she said, her voice betraying a deep vulnerability, “will our undergraduate program be canceled? Because we haven’t recruited any students for two years, we are afraid this program will terminate.” I had, in fact, received internal notices indicating a small but real chance that the program might be shut down. The Chinese director at the time was fighting a battle behind closed doors to ensure that at least this current cohort could graduate before the university formally revalued this program. I did not have full certainty about their fate. But, looking at their worried faces, I absorbed their panic and reflected a confidence I did not actually possess. “This program definitely will not stop,” I told them, effectively lying to protect their motivation. “Whether they recruit new students or not has nothing to do with you.” I continued to encourage them to persist in their studies, projecting the polished optimism expected of a CI representative. The CI teacher was not merely an instructor but an affective proxy for the institution itself, expected to embody enthusiasm, approachability, and an unwavering sense of possibility regardless of the structural realities that circumscribed the program. Furthermore, reflecting upon this moment now, I critically interrogate my own “white lie.” Was I truly protecting my students’ fragile motivation, or was I instinctively protecting my own professional dignity and the CI’s institutional face? Through assuring them of the program’s stability, I became a com-

plicit actor in the very macro-narrative of institutional performativity. Even as I felt empathy for their anxieties, my physical and authoritative presence in that room demanded that I act in a certain way. My empathy, therefore, was inextricably entangled with an unspoken institutional complicity.

However, I did not even know if this persistence was meaningful anymore. I was filled with a deep, consuming sense of guilt. The entire CI program felt like a bright, seductive dream we had woven for them: graduate, master this language, and you will secure a stable position as a Chinese teacher in a local middle school. We were selling them the promise of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). But no one could actually guarantee if CI or the local Ministry of Education would ever grant them those teaching positions. Therefore, my encouragement in that classroom was not just for my students, it was an attempt to comfort myself with something I wanted to believe: that Chinese language skills held material value in the students' futures. I knew that they had to pay 9,000 escudos (90 euros) every single month for tuition. To put that into perspective, even after the January 2025 governmental wage adjustments, the basic minimum wage in Cabo Verde is only 17,000 escudos (Erickson & Soares, 2026), or about 170 euros. Against that baseline, their tuition was a massive, almost crippling financial burden. I knew my students' family backgrounds very well. Except for Andrew, who came from a relatively stable middle-class background, the rest were working-class. So, their decisions to acquire the Chinese language turned my role into something more than just an instructor. I became a custodian of their hope, a position that carried an overwhelming responsibility that crossed the boundaries of my professional and personal existence.

Paradoxically, this structural empathy did not immediately translate into my teaching practice. Faced with the uncertainties of their material futures, which I could not control, I subconsciously retreated to the familiarity of my own educational *habitus*. I sought to maintain order in the only space I could manage: the classroom. At the time, I had not yet connected their class background to their fluid temporality, failing to realize that their chronic lateness was often a byproduct of the very survival struggles I sympathized with. In the Chinese educational context, punctuality is deeply tethered to respect and disciplinary power. A student is expected to arrive early to prepare for class and wait for the teacher. At CI-UNICV, the temporal reality was completely inverted. I would arrive fifteen minutes early to prepare the projector and the board, and then I would sit and wait forty minutes, sometimes a full hour, for all students to arrive. At first, I was extremely angry. Waiting an hour for students to start a class had never happened in my entire teaching career, which I viewed as a personal insult and

an institutional failure. I laid down a very strict rule, which meant that being late meant deducting regular attendance points from their final grade.

Finally, I decided to sit down and talk with them about why they managed to be late to every single class. The public transportation system in Praia is quite unreliable. Laura and Andrew both lived in Ponta da Água, so to get to class, they had to take a crowded bus to Platô in the city center first and then transfer to the Number 15 bus to get to UNICV. Because the new campus is located far out in the suburbs, the Number 15 is the only bus line that services it. The wait time for a single trip was often half an hour. Because I always take a taxi to campus, I rarely experience or understand this. Later, during a semester where my class was scheduled as the last period of the afternoon, I rode the bus back to the city center with them. The process was physically exhausting. The other reason was that some students were working part-time jobs just to afford tuition. Working hours while attending university is a very normal pattern here. So, most of the courses in UNICV went into just half a day, ensuring they had the other half of the day to work, and some of the students were late because of the working schedule as well.

This entangled sense of responsibility and guilt fundamentally reshaped my teaching practice, driving me toward more pragmatism. I began delaying core materials until the entire class had arrived, assigning review exercises to early students to ensure their time was respected. I also restructured the curriculum to integrate the textbook of Business Chinese and Tourism Chinese, hoping to enhance their practical competitiveness in the job market. In retrospect, I have to question whether these curricular adjustments actually reconfigured their socio-economic trajectories, or if they merely functioned as a pedagogical placebo (Puchta, 2010). The uncomfortable reality is that I was most likely treating my own intense guilt rather than their structural unemployment. In attempting a micro-level solution for a macroeconomic abyss, I was harboring the fantasy that a teacher's grit could somehow suture the fractured promise of linguistic capital. What remained unresolved, however, was not simply the efficacy of these interventions, but how they were taken up, reworked, or quietly set aside in the students' own anticipations of the future. The question, in other words, is less what my teaching intended to do and more what it came to mean within the temporal aspirations they inhabited.

My student's absolute favorite thing to do with me is eat ice cream from a shop called *Ice*, located in the center of the Palmarejo. In June 2023, when my initial teaching term ended and it was time for me to leave, we hugged each other in a circle and cried, assuming we would never have the chance to see each

other again. But the field has a way of pulling you back. In November 2024, on my second day back in Praia for PhD fieldwork, I met with the four of them. A year had passed, and Thais was pregnant. The six of us sat together at *Ice* again and chatted about our recent lives. With their graduation approaching, I finally gathered the courage to ask the question: “Do you have any regrets about studying Chinese?”

Laura was the first to speak:

No regrets at all. We’ve studied all the way to this point. Plus, last time when we went to Guangdong University of Foreign Studies for that six-month exchange, it was so much fun. The food, the drinks, the clothes were all so much cheaper than in Cape Verde, and it’s so safe.

Then, she continued, “I want to work in Cape Verde for a year or two first, save some money, and then I want to apply for a scholarship to go to China for another degree, a master’s.” Rather than reflecting on the past, Laura frames studying Chinese in terms of what comes next. The exchange experience is important not as a conclusion, but as something that made further movement seem possible. At the same time, her plan remains cautious, as she expects to work locally before trying to go to China again. Her plan, however, is not one of immediate departure. The interim period of working locally and saving money suggests a calibrated temporality, in which mobility is staged and deferred rather than assumed. In this way, Chinese does not function as a guaranteed pathway but as a resource that might be activated, most concretely through the prospect of a scholarship. It is in this sense that linguistic capital becomes meaningful, not as a direct conversion into employment, but as a speculative asset oriented toward future mobility.

Thais chimed in; her perspective was different. “You like eating so much, of course you want to go,” she teased Laura. Then her tone darkened:

And your grades are the best. I should have chosen English or French back then. I transferred to Chinese, and I don’t even know what I’m going to do. Mostly, I just don’t really want to go to a middle school to be a teacher.

Thais recognized that in the linguistic hierarchy of Cape Verdean society, European languages such as French, Spanish, and English possessed far higher, more immediate liquidity (Carter & Aulette, 2009; Gonsalves, 2012). Her regret was rooted in the realization that her Chinese capital was non-transferable to the life she actually wanted, echoing what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) conceptualizes as the uneven convertibility of linguistic capital across different markets.

Andrew answered, “You could go work in a *Loja China*. Lots of places are hiring.” Mica immediately shut that idea down. “Anyone with four fully functioning limbs can go work in a *Loja China*,” she said flatly. “You don’t need to use your mouth to speak Chinese. And knowing how to speak Chinese won’t give you a single cent of a salary raise.” Mica was entirely correct. Her dismissal of *Loja China* work is a direct assessment of the local economic landscape, where academic Chinese is non-transferable to the local labor market, challenging the CI’s institutional promise. Thais’s regret, in this sense, becomes an articulation of the same constraint, which is that the value of language is always contingent on specific political-economic conditions (Heller, 2010) rather than inherent utility.

As mentioned before, Chinese investment projects in Cape Verde are mostly short-term labor Chinese immigrants working on state-sponsored construction engineering projects. The only major tech presence, Huawei, has exactly three employees due to the microscopic market size of Cabo Verde, including only one Cabo Verdean employee who previously studied in China. This stands in contrast to my previous experience at the CI of Cairo University. In Egypt, the local job market is still hungry for Mandarin, with Huawei, Oppo, medium-to-large cross-border trading companies, long-term construction firms, and a booming tourism industry with a massive shortage of Chinese-speaking guides (Wang, 2026). In Cairo, learning Chinese guaranteed upward class mobility for the students.

In Cabo Verde, however, the employment environment for Chinese majors is extremely localized and severely restricted. It is not just that the three existing Chinese construction companies do not need local translators. More importantly, the Chinese presence is dominated by small vendors and *Loja China* shop owners. These stores do not require their local employees to have Chinese language skills, because the vast majority of Chinese employers speak fluent Creole. In this sense, a subversion occurs, which is that the Chinese immigrants, as dominant economic actors in this micro-interaction, adapt to Cabo Verdean Creole to survive and do business. By using Creole to communicate with workers and customers, they effectively neutralize the capital of formal academic Chinese language training. As a result, the advantage of learning Chinese becomes largely invisible in the Cabo Verdean job market.

The two colleagues who quit

The illusion of the CI as a stable engine of upward mobility did not only fracture in the classroom, but it also came apart in the faculty office. While Laura

and Thais were dealing with the limits of their linguistic capital, my two Cabo Verdean colleagues were facing a different kind of uncertainty within the same system. What appeared, from the outside, as a successful trajectory began to look far less stable when examined from within their everyday working lives.

They had done everything right: learned the Chinese language, secured scholarships, studied in China, and returned to Praia to teach. Both were among the most capable local teachers in the program, often taking on additional responsibilities such as translation, student coordination, and administrative communication between Chinese and Cabo Verdean staff. Their monthly salary was close to 100,000 escudos (1,000 euros), paid irregularly but still significantly higher than most local wages. According to the Cabo Verdean National Institute of Statistics (INE, 2023), the average monthly wage in the country is around 23,000 to 25,000 escudos (roughly 200-220 euros). By that measure, they were clearly among the better paid segment of the population, and their positions were often perceived by others as desirable and even enviable. And yet, both eventually chose to leave. The decision did not come suddenly. It emerged slowly, through repeated moments of hesitation, small frustrations, and conversations that returned again and again to the same question: what does this job offer in the long run?

The problem was not the salary itself, but what sat underneath it. Their contracts were structured through multiple institutions: funding from CLEC in Beijing was transferred to Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and then routed through UNICV before reaching them. At each step, responsibility became less clear. What looked like a straightforward employment relationship was, in practice, a layered arrangement in which no single institution took full responsibility. This ambiguity actually shaped everyday interactions, including questions about salary delays (three months and more), leave, or benefits, which were rarely resolved directly. Instead, they were redirected, sometimes politely, sometimes dismissively, from one office to another. Over time, this produced a sense not only of frustration but also of being structurally unrecognized.

They were treated as “project staff,” which placed them outside the Cabo Verdean national system. UNICV did not register them with social security, and they had no access to health insurance, pension contributions, or other basic protections. The salary was high, but it stood on very thin ground. It was enough to sustain a certain standard of living in the present, but it could not be easily translated into long-term stability. Carlos described this situation to me during an interview in our shared office, a small room we both used between classes, often filled with half-finished lesson plans and stacks of student assignments:

It is a relentless game of institutional ping-pong. When I ask the Chinese director about social benefits, I am told to go to UNICV. When I go to UNICV, they tell me I am not their employee but part of a project funded by China. I am counted when there is work, but not when it comes to rights. Even the salary can be delayed for months. (Carlos, personal communication, 11/03/2025)

What he described was not simply bureaucratic inefficiency but a pattern. Being “counted” and “not counted” did not happen randomly, but actually followed a clear logic. When labor was needed, such as teaching, translating, or coordinating for both sides, they were fully included. When rights or obligations were at stake, that inclusion disappeared.

In Cabo Verde, being registered with Instituto Nacional de Previdência Social is what makes a job livable over time. It provides access to healthcare, maternity leave, sick pay, and pensions (INPS, 2022). Without it, a high salary does not translate into security. Instead, it becomes something that must constantly be managed, saved, and guarded against unexpected events. Ana put this very plainly when we spoke during her last week. We met at a small café near campus, a place where staff often went between classes. She spoke without much hesitation, as if she had already explained this to others before:

People think I am lucky because of the salary. But when I applied for a mortgage, everything stopped when they asked for my INPS. If I get sick or want to have a family, this salary cannot protect me. I cannot build a life on this. (Interview with Ana, 20/01/2025)

What mattered was not only the absence of benefits but what that absence made impossible. Without INPS registration, owning a home or starting a family with some degree of security remained out of reach. The salary, in this sense, could support consumption, but not long-term planning. Leaving, then, was not a failure. It was a way of stepping out of a position that paid well in the short term but offered no ground to stand on. Both moved to jobs with lower salaries but full registration in the social security system. The trade-off was clear: less income, but more stability, more recognition, and a clearer sense of where they stood.

My own situation was not entirely different, though it took a different form. As a Chinese teacher, my contract also did not include social insurance. My term could be extended only up to six years, after which I had to apply to be sent to a different country following the rules of the CLEC. The process is framed as an opportunity for international experience, but it also means that staying in one place is never really an option. In everyday terms, this produces a different kind

of uncertainty. I am not excluded from a national system in the same way as Carlos and Ana, but I am also not fully part of any system for long. Whether in Cabo Verde, Egypt, or elsewhere, the arrangement remains largely unchanged. If I want social protection, I have to arrange it myself, often at significant personal cost.

In this sense, we were not as different as our positions suggested. Their insecurity was tied to not being recognized locally; mine was tied to never being able to stay. The conditions were not identical, but they were connected through the same institutional structure. Perhaps this transnationally shared precarity is the truest, yet almost unrecorded, cultural practice we actually engaged in within the CI. It strips away the grand facade of soft power, exposing the raw reality of transnational workers simply finding comfort in one another while struggling to survive the system together.

Whenever students looked up at me with expectant eyes, asking, “Teacher, are you going to stay here for a long time? Will you keep teaching us?,” the question would trigger an extensive, indescribable pang of sadness. My response, a reassuring but deliberately vague “I will stay, of course,” was a conscious, even if painful, choice. I told myself I was simply being “professional,” setting a stable groundwork for my eventual replacement. I even convinced myself that they would forget about me soon anyway. But this rationalization was a defense mechanism to manage my own guilt. Upholding this staged stability forced me into a state of permanent affective tension. Bridging the gap between a private truth and a public mission required a calculated emotional performance that left me hollowed out.

There is a Chinese saying: “The barracks are made of iron, but the soldiers flow like water.” In this context, the CI was the unyielding iron, and we teachers are the disposable, flowing water. How could I bring myself to confess to my students that the ever-smiling, authoritative teacher at the front of the room was vulnerable and that I had to think twice before getting a bad cold? Instead, I actively chose to perform absolute certainty, confidence, and composure with my colleagues and students. The unwavering stability I projected in the classroom was, ironically, a desperate mask designed to conceal the deep, systemic insecurity of my own position.

I slowly came to realize that in this space where accountability has been systematically stripped away through layers of transnational outsourcing, our actual cultural practice went far beyond just teaching a language or culture exchange. It was us, as individuals, using our own lives and emotions to physically bridge the institutional gap left by the CI system. I truly loved my time in the classroom and

shared a deep emotional bond with my colleagues and students. But this pure affection was constantly entangled with the uncertainty of having no safety net and no clear future. Caught between passion and survival, outward composure, and internal vulnerability, I was just like my Cabo Verdean colleagues who had left and calculated the next step in our lives. Also, this was a part of the reason why I chose to pursue a PhD and hope to map out a new career path.

Conclusion

This article offers a careful and grounded account of what it actually means to “encountering” the China and Africa relation through the CI-UNICV. Rather than treating the CI as a simple instrument of soft power or a neutral site of language teaching, I have examined it here as a lived contact zone shaped by uneven structures, local constraints, and human emotions. Through an autoethnographic approach, feelings of guilt, frustration, empathy, and uncertainty are not dismissed as subjective noise; they are treated as meaningful data that reveal how CI systems operate in practice within African contexts. At the same time, this study remains attentive to the ethical challenges of representation. Recognizing the agency of my students and colleagues is important to the analytical integrity of this work, avoiding the trap of reducing them to passive subjects of macro-politics.

At the macro level, the CI-UNICV appears to be a clear institutional success. It is embedded within a large-scale campus, integrated into the national secondary school system, and supported by long-standing diplomatic ties between China and Cabo Verde. These visible achievements align well with official narratives of mutual benefit and South-South cooperation. However, this article has shown that such a perspective is incomplete. When examined at the micro level, the apparent coherence of this institutional project begins to fracture. The failure of the undergraduate Chinese International Education program to sustain student enrollment is not an isolated administrative issue but a critical point of tension that exposes deeper structural misalignments.

When students gradually disappear from the program, or when colleagues choose to leave, and when I choose to leave, it does not indicate a lack of interest or discipline. Rather, it reflects rational decision-making within Cape Verde’s socio-economic environment. Yet, the article shows that the CI is not simply a site where structural forces dictate outcomes; it is an active space of negotiation. Within this educational context, relationships between colleagues, teachers, and students are shaped by both institutional expectations and personal vulnerabil-

ities. My own experience of reassuring students about the program's uncertain future illustrates how emotional labor becomes central to the functioning of the CI-UNICV. The experiences of Ana and Carlos further highlight the deep absence of long-term security. The temporary nature of contracts and the need to constantly move within the global CI system create a shared condition of transnational precarity. The CI-UNICV does not simply reproduce a one-directional hierarchy between China and Africa. Instead, it generates a layered system in which different actors experience power and insecurity in uneven, yet interconnected, ways.

This perspective makes it clear that transnational educational initiatives cannot be fully understood simply by measuring their coherence or success. As the experiences documented here reveal, these initiatives operate more like assemblages of partial alignments, improvised adjustments, and affective investments. The illusion of institutional stability is sustained not only through formal structures but through the dispersed labor of individuals who navigate uncertainty in real time. Attention to these micro-processes reveals that what is often framed as "cooperation" is, in practice, contingent, fragile, and experienced.

This study therefore calls for a reorientation in how China-Africa engagements are analytically approached. Rather than privileging state discourse, institutional design, or policy outcomes as primary sites of interpretation, it foregrounds the epistemic value of lived experience. The CI-UNICV functions less as a rigid institution and more as a relational space. It is built through ongoing negotiations among actors who occupy different positions within global hierarchies but share a similar exposure to insecurity. By centering these lived dynamics, this article suggests that the analytical vocabulary of China-Africa studies must expand to account for ambiguity, contradiction, and the affective dimensions of engagement.

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