

IDEOLOGY AND EDUCATION IN CHINA: PORTUGUESE LANGUAGE POLICY AT THE INTERSECTION OF STATECRAFT AND STRATEGY

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Abstract

This study examines the ideological foundations of foreign language education in the People's Republic of China, arguing that language planning is inseparable from the state's ideological strategies and international engagement. Drawing from a historical perspective that traces the evolution of Chinese education from the late imperial period to the present, it demonstrates how educational policy has consistently subordinated intercultural exchange to national interests. Foreign language instruction, rather than reflecting openness or pluralism, is deployed as a strategic instrument, valued for its developmental utility while subject to strict ideological boundaries. The analysis focuses on the political role of education as a means of regulating access to foreign knowledge and maintaining internal cohesion. In this context, foreign languages are approached not as cultural bridges, but as managed resources: imported for diplomatic and economic advantage yet carefully contained to avoid ideological disruption. This dynamic is exemplified by the case of Portuguese, whose rise in China's academic landscape reflects wider geopolitical and economic shifts rather than cultural demand or educational reform. Its institutional expansion aligns closely with China's foreign policy interests, especially in relation to Lusophone countries and the symbolic role of Macau.



By situating language policy within the ideological architecture of the Chinese state, the article contributes to the study of international education as a form of statecraft. It also underscores the importance of aligning language promotion strategies - such as those pursued by Portugal - with the internal logics and constraints of partner countries. In doing so, it responds to the goals of this special issue by offering a critical, historically grounded account of Sino-Portuguese engagement through the lens of ideology, education, and global positioning.

Keywords

Ideology and Education, Language Policy, Portuguese as a Foreign Language, China.

Resumo

Este estudo examina os fundamentos ideológicos do ensino de línguas estrangeiras na República Popular da China, argumentando que o planeamento linguístico é inseparável das estratégias ideológicas do Estado e do seu posicionamento internacional. A partir de uma perspetiva histórica que acompanha a evolução da educação chinesa desde o final do período imperial até à atualidade, demonstra-se que a política educativa tem, de forma consistente, subordinado o intercâmbio intercultural aos interesses nacionais. O ensino de línguas estrangeiras, longe de refletir abertura ou pluralismo, é mobilizado como instrumento estratégico, valorizado pela sua utilidade para o desenvolvimento, mas confinado a limites ideológicos estritos. A análise centra-se no papel político da educação enquanto mecanismo de regulação do acesso ao conhecimento estrangeiro e de preservação da coesão interna. Neste enquadramento, as línguas estrangeiras não são concebidas como pontes culturais, mas como recursos geridos: importados por razões diplomáticas e económicas, porém cuidadosamente controlados para evitar potenciais perturbações ideológicas. Esta dinâmica é exemplificada pelo caso da língua portuguesa, cujo crescimento no panorama académico chinês reflete transformações geopolíticas e económicas mais amplas, e não uma procura cultural intrínseca ou uma reforma educativa. A sua expansão institucional alinha-se fortemente com os interesses da política externa chinesa, particularmente nas relações com os países lusófonos e no papel simbólico de Macau. Ao situar a política linguística na arquitetura ideológica do Estado chinês, esta investigação contribui para o estudo da educação internacional como forma de "construção do estado". Sublinha, igualmente, a importância de alinhar estratégias de promoção linguística - como as desenvolvidas por Portugal - com as lógicas internas e as restrições dos países parceiros. Deste modo, responde aos objetivos deste número temático ao oferecer uma leitura crítica e historicamente fundamentada do envolvimento sino-português através das lentes da ideologia, da educação e do posicionamento global.

Palavras-chave

Ideologia e Educação, Política Linguística, Português Língua Estrangeira, China.

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Introduction

Foreign language education in China has long mirrored the state's evolving engagement with the outside world. While English has remained dominant, other languages have gained traction according to shifting political and economic interests. Among these, Portuguese presents a compelling case, due not only to its unique historical entry into China's linguistic landscape but also because of its association with strategic partnerships across the Lusophone world.

This comes at a time when the Chinese leadership has embarked on a decidedly more ideological approach to education. Drawing lessons from classical Chinese philosophy and incorporating elements of Marxism-Leninism, Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era attempts to produce a form of harmonious society, by which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the sole unifier of the Chinese people.

Portuguese as a foreign language, which is directed at foreign nationals who are not from the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), thus faces new challenges. The present paper offers a broad evolution of the concept of harmony and how it has been used during different stages of Chinese history. Furthermore, the CCP's ideology has been increasingly pushed into the education system since 2012, as a way of creating a harmonious society Under-Heaven, starting with the Chinese youths. This, conversely, leads to a new evaluation of different possibilities for PLE to adapt to the current ideological education environment in a time of great uncertainty.

Building Social Harmony in the Era of Xi Jinping: The Role of Education Philosophical Origins of Harmony

The concept of harmony (*he* 和) is ever-present in Chinese history. During the pre-Qin dynasty period, Chen (2018, p. 43) states that social and political upheaval was the norm.

¹ Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study..



Pines (2023) describes how the decline of the Zhou dynasty (1046 to 256 BC) resulted in a power struggle to achieve unity under a new leadership. The 4th century BCE furthered this status quo during the Warring States period (*Zhanguo* 战国, 453–221 BC). Pines (2023) indicates that:

"As wars became bloodier and more devastating, and with no adequate diplomatic means to settle the conflicts in sight, most thinkers and statesmen came to an understanding that unity of "All-Under-Heaven" (tianxia 天下) was the only means to attain peace and stability" (Pines, 2000).

This greatly influenced philosophers of the time who searched for the ideal form of harmony. Li (2008, pp. 423 & 424) further confirms this statement, elaborating that harmony pre-dates Confucius. Citing Shi Bo, a scholar-minister of the Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE), harmony is achieved by means of the five flavours and six measures of sound. Yan, Li & Fu (2021, p. 57) further illustrate how Shi Bo viewed this concept as a way of congregating different perspectives to formulate new ones. This "harmony without uniformity", which focuses on achieving an equilibrium between different perspectives, is also promoted by the Chinese government (China Keywords, 2024), as this article will later illustrate.

The Warring States period thus produced a series of schools of thought, each with their epistemology and solutions to create greater harmony. Of the One Hundred Schools, four are of particular interest to this study and are considered among the most influential of Chinese philosophies: Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism and Mohism. The first of these, Confucianism, has generally garnered more attention as still contributing to the guiding principles the CCP follows to this day. In the Confucian Classic *Shi Jing* (诗经), harmony is an ideal that encapsulates a balanced relationship with other people and nature. In the *Yue Ji* (乐记), following up on Shi Bo's statements, music plays an integral role in promoting morals. Li (2008, p. 425) further states:

"Confucius considered harmony fundamentally necessary. In the Confucian view, music more than anything else captures the essence of harmony. Music is the process of bringing a plurality of sounds into concord. (...) In the Confucian view, music has this powerful positive effect on people because it is intrinsically harmonizing".

Harmony is not exclusive to Confucian thought, on the contrary. In Daoism it plays a central role, as Chen (2018, p. 42) clarifies. For Daoists, there are three main forms of harmony: natural harmony (*tian he* 天和), human harmony (*ren he* 人和), and the harmony of the heart-mind (*xin he* 心和). They are all integrated to form their own philosophy, one that is centred on humans' relation to the spirit and not merely attached to societal and political affairs (Chen, 2018, p. 43).

Legalism, another philosophy of the "Hundred Schools", also concerns itself with this concept. In the *Book of Lord Shang*, Shang Yang reminds the reader that change is part



of society and that coercion is the only force capable of leading a knowledgeable people (Pines, 2023). To construct harmony, therefore, morals are not enough, as Confucianists would believe. Han Fei who, alongside Shang Yang, is one of the main Legalists, claimed that morality guided human interaction in the past because it was an era of abundance. As resources became more limited due to population growth, Han contended, just like Shang, that coercion was necessary to create harmony Under Heaven. The essence of this thought led Qin Shihuang's² approach to governance: a highly centralized government which resulted in brutal takedown of those that deviated from the laws of the land (Pines, 2000; Pines, 2023)³. The argument can also be made that the PRC has used legalism as a means to achieve harmony. Mao Zedong and his followers believed that legalists could contribute to the construction of a new nation. The Great Leap Forward, as Tanrikut (2024) explains, was characterized by a combination of Marxism-Leninism and legalism.

Finally, Mohism promotes harmony through a combination of impartial concern for those All Under Heaven and the existence of an authoritarian centralized government backed up by a bureaucratic system. The leader, as Fraser (2024) indicates, should be enlightened and guided by virtue. In the eyes of Mohists, education promotes a social conformity based on ethical principles that everyone will follow. Furthermore, political issues can be resolved through debate, as dialogue leads to objective solutions (Fraser, 2024).

The Fall of the Qing and the Republican Era (1911-1949)

Different solutions to establish some sort of socio-political order were tried and tested throughout Chinese history and well into the last years of the Qing dynasty and the Republican era. Liang Qichao, one of the key modernizers of Chinese sociology, sought out to prepare the nation for a new era. As such, Liang envisioned a social harmony that incorporated elements of Western and Chinese thought. As Liu (2020, pp. 65-66) states, Liang was profoundly influenced by Kang Youwei, his mentor and a great critic of classic Chinese philosophy, studied Western thinkers including during his academic years in Japan and followed his mentor in attempting to reform Confucianism. As Jin (2023) points out, the defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1895) propelled a young Liang to a path of modernizing China. Crucially, in 1898, Liang and Kang launched the Hundred Day's Reform period, an attempt to save the imperial rule, that ended being suppressed by conservative forces (Jin, 2023). Nonetheless, this did not mean rejecting the past, on the contrary. Kang Youwei's New Text Confucianism proposed to preserve the essence of Confucius and Mencius while adapting it to a new political environment. Fairbank (2006, p. 229) further indicates that Kang wished for Confucianism to become the national religion of China, a firm commitment to the "new nation's" connection to its past.

Liang, however, would stray away from his mentor, thanks to his interaction with Yan Fu, abandoning the idea that Confucianism should be protected at all costs (Liu, 2020: 81-

² First emperor of the Qin dynasty, Qin Shihuang ruled from 259 to 210 BC.

³ Legalism fell out of favor from the Han dynasty onward



83). For Liang, in the end, Chinese philosophy, and Western thought should give way to a new form of balance and harmony. The end of the imperial era, however, brought significant changes to the Chinese political sphere.

The fall of the Qing, a dynasty long in decline as evident from the Opium Wars and the Taiping rebellion (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006, pp. 201-206) gave way to the rise of republicanism. For Sun Yat-sen it was an opportunity to

"(...) dismantle the Manchu rule that had governed China for more than two and a half centuries and had become, particularly in the nineteenth century, an object of scorn and frustration to much of the Chinese citizenry" (Chang & Gordon, 1991, pp. 21-22).

This was a particularly novel concept in China at the time, considering how industrial development was at the center of republican policies. As Barrington Moore (1966, pp. 177-178) explains, the urbanization efforts of the early 20th century resulted from the disintegration of the social order of the countryside and the emergence of commerce in the coastal areas⁴. For Sun Yat-sen, this served as a basis to create a new form of nationalism, one that repudiated cosmopolitanism or universalism (Sun, 1924, pp. 26-28) while drawing inspiration from a distant past. Sun Yat-sen famously repurposed *Tianxia* 天下 or All Under Heaven, the Zhou dynasty's sinocentric cosmos (Zhao, 2019), calling it *Tianxia weigong* 天下为公. For Sun, the concept of Great Harmony was relevant, as Chen (2011) illustrates. A key part of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 礼记), the *Datong* 大同 was essential to the socio-political harmony of the past. The *Tianxia weigong*, as Sun proposed, was a rebranded version intended to make All Under Heaven serve the people (Chang & Gordon, 1991, p. 129; Chen, 2011)

The following decades were marked by constant inner turmoil. Yuan Shikai's rule during the Beiyang government period was characterized by ever-lasting disputes among different cliques and warlords (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006, pp. 249-251). By the time China had finally established itself as a somewhat unified country, the initial pressure and later invasion by the Japanese Empire meant that the Kuomintang (KMT) leaders would be incapable of asserting their form of harmony. The situation became even more dire with the ascension of the CCP as the main rival to the KMT. Once the former defeated the nationalists, Mao Zedong set his sights to guide the nation to socialism. While the first few years were distinctively not socialist (Blecher, 2019, p. 155)⁵, similarly to the New Economy of the Soviet Union, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution repudiated China's philosophical heritage, Confucianism being particularly targeted as an enemy of progress. However, a strong argument can be made that legalism did exert some influence on Mao's policies, for two main reasons. Firstly, both legalism and Maoism required strong, centralized and authoritarian leadership. Secondly, the law was

⁴ Yet, the country was clearly lacking in machinery: of around 20 000 factories, China only possessed 363 with machines.

⁵ Up until the Great Leap Forward the Chinese economy retained some elements of capitalism as it was still not ready to embrace socialism, given its lack of development.



supposed to be the main guiding principle, even if it drove to major injustices committed against the people (Tanrikut, 2025).

The CCP and the Birth of a New State Ideology

Mao Zedong had, thus, formulated his own version of Marxism while retaining a connection to China's philosophical past. According to Paul (2021, p. 265), the CCP's ideology combines elements of the Communist Manifesto, Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism and traditional Chinese philosophy. From Leninism, the paramount leader extracted the party vanguard and violent revolution concepts. However, the lack of an industrial base, led Mao in search of supporters among peasants. At the time, 89.36% of the Chinese population lived in the countryside, and only recently this trend has flipped in the opposite direction (Xinhua, 2019⁶). With the peasantry behind him, Mao embarked on his fight against oppressive foreign forces. Ideologically, in conclusion, the CCP formed its own basis fully adapted to the country's context. Lenin asserted that the Marxist class struggle was key to achieving a communist society (Touchard, 1961, p. 476 & 495-501), believing that the proletariat's power would lead to the fall of the bourgeoisie and, eventually, to a classless society (Lenin, 1977, pp. 8-9).

For Mao Zedong, it was this combination that allowed to create a sense of unity, both against the Japanese and the KMT. As such, ideology may have a congregating effect, and it evolves through time. Arendt (1953, p. 316) defines ideology as the logic of an idea in constant motion and transformation. This is precisely how it is possible to define China's state ideology, that is, a process that has developed through decades with every leader adding new elements to it, as a response to the specific circumstances of their time.

Crucially, Mao understood the importance of education as a means of imposing the will of the CCP. As such, ideological and political education has, since Maoist times, become a mainstay of the PRC's education system. Post-1949, the state narrative centered on the Century of Humiliation (百年国耻 *bǎinián guóchǐ*), not only as way of reminding the Chinese people of the oppression at the hands of foreign powers, but also of how classical thought and old ideas were culprits of the country's downfall (Wang, 2008, p. 789). Afterwards, the discourse shifted towards the class struggle. According to Wang (2008, p.789), the Communist leadership wished to direct the youth's rage towards the bourgeoisie and landlords that still dominated and held part of the country's wealth. And yet there were concerns that thought would become overly stifled by the CCP's ideological guidance. Nikita Khrushchev's attack on Josef Stalin let the Soviet Union to loosen its grip on the population. Taking note on these developments Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai launched the Hundred Flowers Movement (1956-1957) intending to encourage intellectuals to criticize the government and help implement reformed policies. However, the Campaign ended as soon as criticism became perilous to the Party and its legitimacy as leading force of the nation. King (2012) accurately states that the subsequent Anti-

⁶ The rural population in 2018 was 40,42% of the total.



Rightist Campaign of 1957 resulted in the re-education or execution of thousands of critics.

The CCP in this context portrayed itself as the vanguard of the people against the perceived oppressive forces. The triumph of the Chinese people was tied to the success of the Party, even when Mao was publicly criticized after his death in 1976. The victorious CCP was continuously supported by state-led media. The People's Daily, for instance, remarked it was crucial to firmly embrace ideological education (抓紧思想教育). Chen (2021) also explains that this was understood as a necessary effort to find scapegoats for the country's backwardness. The traditional targets were, as the author exemplifies, violent attacks perpetrated by the enemy, Chiang Kai-shek or to stimulate the unity of the peasantry, the core of the CCP's class struggle and united front.

The Cultural Revolution further exemplifies how the Mao period pushed for greater ideological strength in the education system. According to Wang (1975, p. 760), the education reforms of the time sought to ensure greater "political conscious" of students, as well as provide training that could be useful to China's industrial and agricultural output. For this to be achieved, decision-makers understood that education had to spread nationwide. However, the re-education of intellectuals placed a massive strain on college education, as its greatest thinkers were under constant threat of public criticism or of being sent to villages and factories to work (Chandra, 1987, p. 130). Ideologically, the regime intended to create a uniform critical mass supported by the lowest strata of society. When the new enrolment policy was rolled out in 1972, as Leff singles out (2019, p.12), access to higher education depended on ideological knowledge and not academic achievements, thus making education subservient to politics. Other reforms were introduced to enhance the ideological presence in education:

"Along with appointing Communist Party cadres to high ranking administrative positions in the universities, political ideology dominated the higher education curriculum. Textbooks used during the Cultural Revolution were entirely rewritten in accordance to the new political doctrine in place. The students and faculty members were required to visit the factories and communes to learn from the laboring class and peasants" (Leff, 2019, p.13).

As mentioned before, ideological education is not a novelty in present-day China. The Republican authorities, after the fall of the Qing, focused their attention on the Century of Humiliation. Starting with the first Opium War, this period was marked by the steep decline of the last imperial dynasty. For about 100 years, foreign powers were responsible for carving up the Chinese territory under the threat of warfare or imposed via unequal treaties, the first of which being the treaty of Nanjing (1842) (Lesaffer, 2025). This discourse continued in Taiwan after the expulsion of the KMT from the mainland (Wang, 2008, p. 789). In search of new targets, the CCP identified the class struggle against oppressive forces as key to settling the Party as the vanguard. (Wang, 2008, p. 789). In Beijing, as Peng (2023, pp. 1033-1035) clarifies, there was the perception that there were certain segments of society still "contaminated" by bourgeois education. The



resulting policies that the Cultural Revolution heightened the desire to rid the country of such interference, particularly in urban areas.

Post-1989: Reforming Ideological and Political Education

The year 1989 was a turning point. Deng Xiaoping acknowledged the investment in ideological education had not sufficed (Zeng, 2016, p. 115). Furthermore, the leading class of the Party were also fearful of losing legitimacy. After decades of building a unifying image of themselves, Zhang (2008, p. 788) alludes, the Mandate of Heaven was on the verge of being led astray.

Chen (2021) broadens this analysis, as the PRC prioritized the implementation of ideological and political education in the entire teaching process (把思想政治教育贯彻在全部教育过程中). Deng Xiaoping and the proponents of the Reform and Opening policies paid little attention to political and ideological education. From the beginning this was understood as a way of distancing the CCP from the excesses of the past. Now that the nation was surging because of economic prosperity and non-isolationism, ideology took the backseat. Callahan (2006, p. 85) determined that between 1947 and 1990 national humiliation related books were not published. However, the opening of the PRC brought along a few unintended consequences. Prior to 1989, the lack of focus on the ideological education was conducive to potential internal instability. This compounded in 1989 with the events at Tiananmen Square, leaving Deng Xiaoping to conclude that

"one of the greatest failures of the CCP leadership during the Reform and Opening up period was not considering political-ideological education as a priority".

As such, the crackdown on the pro-democracy demonstrations in 1989 resulted in a renewed ideological fervour with particular focus on the education system. In 1992, Deng's Southern Tour was not only devised to relaunch the country's economy, but also to assert the CCP's position as sole representative of the Chinese people. The State Education Commission published the "Reform and Development of Education in China Program". At its core, it highlighted that patriotism should be the most important value for the PRC. In 1994, 95% of Beijing's primary and high school students had already watched patriotic movies recommended by the State Education Commission, as part of the "Circular on Carrying Out Education of Patriotism for Primary and Secondary Schools Through Out the Country via Good Films and TV Series" (Zhao, 1998).

Ideological work was, as such, well underway with further contributions from the Ministry of Education and the Communist Youth League's Central Committee. New courses were created, for example, "Marxism Basic Principles" or "Introduction to Maoism and Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" (Chen, 2021). Books and teaching materials were also targeted. Published in April 1990, *The Indignation of National Humiliation* served as a remembrance of the events of the First Opium War,



reinstating the Century of Humiliation as central to the CCP's ideological discourse against domestic and foreign threats (Callahan, 2006, pp. 186-187).

During Hu Jintao's time as the Secretary General of the CCP, in October 2004 the CCP Central Committee and the State Council published *Opinion on Further Strengthening and Improvement of Ideological and Political Education for College Students* (关于加强和改进大学生思想政治教育的意见). As Chen (2021) elaborates

"That document stated that "strengthening and improving the ideological and political education of college students is an extremely urgent and important task," and that "raising their ideological and political character" was necessary in order to "cultivate them into the builders and successors of the socialist cause with Chinese characteristics".

Nonetheless, ideological education was perceived to have become stagnant. Chen (2021) confirms this hypothesis by analysing the number of occurrences of the term *sizheng* 思政⁷, from 1994 to 2021, in the People's Daily, the CCP's main media mouthpiece. Of the 766 occurrences, 700 correspond to the time since Xi's takeover in 2012. Obedience to the Party, while crucial, was no longer enough to form harmony and ensure a cohesive, unified popular front. During Xi Jinping's stewardship, though, circumstances have shifted.

Current Ideological Trend Under Xi Jinping

Presently, Xi's Thought is the last iteration of the PRC's ideology. Introduced in the CCP Constitution in 2017, it highlights the historical role of the Party in unifying the people. As an extension of the path created by Mao Zedong, it encompasses the armed forces, technological innovation, ecology or the improvement of Chinese people's livelihood. Its presence is crucial for Xi and the country's leadership which, in turn, makes it fundamentally necessary to be taught at every level of the education system (Xinhua, 2024). In other words, Xi's thought must be studied and interiorized from an early age as to ensure that harmony is produced with the Party at the center of the *Tianxia*.

The CCP, therefore, acted when the new government took power in 2012. One of Xi Jinping's main objectives as the Paramount Leader of the People's Republic of China is to further the efforts of establishing a form of social harmony under the helm of the CCP. As discussed, the concept of harmony is not foreign or a novelty in the realm of political-philosophical Chinese thought. However, the Communist rule has presently a clear view on what that harmony should look like, and it should be at the centre of the order Under Heaven. As Tatlow suggests (2018), the CCP views itself as the inheritor of the *tianchao* 天朝, "heavenly empire," the actual ruling force that governed all matters *Tianxia*. President Xi Jinping has embraced his role as the "emperor". During the celebration of Confucius' 2565th anniversary, Xi highlighted that the current ruling class

⁷ Shortened version of *sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu* (思想政治教育) or ideological and political education.



is a successor to those responsible for actively promoting Chinese tradition (Tatlow, 2018: p.6). However, this does not simply mean that China is attempting to replicate the harmonious society of imperial times. As aforementioned, the ideological fingerprint of the CCP is ever-present as it promotes a kind of social order with little to no trace of foreign influence. The Document 9, a communiqué that spread among Party members in April 2013, offers a deeper glance into the perceived perils exposure to Western ideals. Broadly speaking, Document 9 outlines seven political threats to the CCP-led harmony, namely, promoting Western-style constitutional democracy, universal values that weaken the Party, civil society unrest, neoliberalism, Western-style media, historical nihilism and negative views on the CCP and New China and putting into question the Reform and Opening process (ChinaFile, 2013). As such, it called for Party leaders all over the country to pay close attention to these perceived threats and enhance ideological work through education. These set of guidelines have, therefore, garnered attention by the Chinese leadership. Education, as Xi (2014, p. 93) himself declares is an important means to ensure a harmonious society (Stanzel *et al.*, 2017, pp. 4-7). Teaching materials play a key role. In August 2021, Han Zhen, head of the Textbook National Committee, concluded that Xi Jinping's Thought about Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era would become part of basic, vocational and higher education. This statement came after new guidelines from the Ministry of Education that expected Marxist beliefs to become stronger among Chinese youth, as well as strengthening the path, theory, system and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Global Times, 2024). National unity is crucial for the CCP's national interests and education is at its core, as the Patriotic Education Law determines (CLT, 2023b).

From a discourse perspective, the ruling party has pushed this concrete narrative as a means of ensuring not only that the Communist leadership is necessary, but also that there should be no foreign interference when it comes to domestic issues. Back in 2014, the General Office of the Party Central Committee and the State Council advocated for stronger control over the education system (Fu, 2024). Xi clarified, in 2019, during a speech to professors and educators of political ideology and theory, that political-ideological education is irreplaceable and bestowed responsibility on educators to enlighten students in the relevance of socialism with Chinese Characteristics, party theories, institutions and culture. Fu (2024) clarifies that higher education particularly targeted

"Specific measures included strengthening political training sessions for faculty and standardizing textbooks across disciplines, particularly in the social sciences".

In 2021, a nationwide inspection was conducted at 31 universities to assess the effectiveness of ideological teaching. Two top-tier institutions, Tsinghua University and Peking University, were criticized for their inefficiencies in promoting the CCP's thought (Liu, 2021).

Language teaching has also been repeatedly targeted, particularly relating to the English's weight in the *gaokao*, the annual university entry exam. Since 2012 the National



People's Congress (NPC) and the China People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) have received proposals to reduce the importance of English when it comes to evaluating the *gaokao* (Leung, 2023). While these proposals and opinions have not, for the most part, translated into actual changes in the college admissions process (Fu, 2024; Leung, 2023⁸), it signals a growing desire from policymakers to diminish the status of a foreign subject, while highlighting greater ideological work.

From a legal standpoint, the Chinese government has also set forth a series of laws that aim to promote national unity. The Patriotic Education Law (CLT, 2023b), approved in October 2023 and rolled out on January 1st, 2024, is part of broader legislation that includes the Counter-espionage Law (CLT, 2023a), the revised National Security Law (CLT 2015) and the Hong Kong National Security Law (Lam, 2020). To the Chinese authorities, these documents intend to create a CCP-led social harmony that isolates society from external influence.

Of particular relevance to this study, the 2024 Patriotic Education Law (CLT, 2023b) represents a renewed effort to recentre the role of political and ideological instruction. Through this legislation, the Chinese Communist Party seeks to cultivate an educational environment in which students—from kindergarten through university—are systematically exposed to, and expected to develop proficiency in, Xi Jinping Thought. As mentioned before, Xi's presidency has been marked by a thought isolationism as it pushes away Western liberal democracy values and norms. The rejection of these elements also extends to democracy in its liberal form. The whole-process people's democracy, as showcased in its eponymous white paper (SCIO, 2021), is, from the Chinese perspective, a more inclusive and direct form of democracy. In short, the election process in China starts at the local level. From there, elected officials are able to select members of parliament at municipal level and so forth, up the National People's Congress, China's top legislative body (SCIO, 2021). Candidates are not exclusively members of the CCP and there have been elected officials from the other nine political parties that form the United Front.

The Patriotic Education Law derives from government documents, such as the 2016 Ministry of Education directive or the CCP Central Committee and State Council's 2019 patriotic education directive (Department of Education, 2024), instructing all education departments of every teaching level at the Provincial tier to implement the patriotic education. Article 6 of the law explains what patriotic education is:

- CCP's, New China's, Reform and Opening, socialism development and Chinese people's history;
- socialism with Chinese characteristics system, CCP's accomplishments and the lived experience of the people's unity;
- the Chinese people's culture, as well as the revolutionary and advanced socialist cultures;

⁸ The Beijing government has downgraded English in the *gaokao*.



- basic knowledge of the constitution, national and ethnic unit, national security and defence;
- martyrs, heroes and model citizen as symbols of the spirit of the people and the spirit of the times;
- other content rich in patriotic sentiment (CLT, 2023b).

Ideologically, the PRC is invested in ensuring a certain level of uniformity of thought. Yet the expectations of the Chinese population may be distinctive to what the government desires, in part, because there is difficulty to change deeply engrained beliefs. Focusing on access to higher education, Chinese parents greatly invest in guaranteeing that their children have a better chance of reaching of the top universities of the country. Besides extra classes, even during weekends, guardians enroll students in extra-curricular activities from music to sports, in an attempt to give an edge to these students. Conversely, some policies go against the parents' interests. The *double reduction* (双减政策 *shuāng jiǎn zhèng cè*) which sought to alleviate the number of extracurricular classes and the amount of homework given to school students, ended up with several private tutoring institutions ceasing operations (Zhao, Shi & Wang, 2024). This, in turn, led parents to seek alternatives in the black market.

Furthermore, the State Council has tried to condition what career path the Chinese youth may choose which, in turn, only leads to more panic among parents. The high school entry exams, *zhongkao* (中考), have become increasingly subject of attention. In July 2023, 15,4 million students took part in this examination and only 50% of the examinees were allowed to move on to "regular" high schools that lead to university. The bottom half either entered the job market or chose vocational training (Li, 2023). However, fear of failure is a systemic issue in Chinese society, as Liu (2020) explains, given that there is a focus on the "science of success" (*chenggong xue* 成功学) as a counterpoint to the "science of failure" (*shibai xue* 失败学).

For the CCP, adapting to the market conditions does not seem to eliminate the necessity of promoting stronger unity through ideology. Major developments in AI, digital literacy and STEM (Global Times, 2024) are examples of such a statement. The STEM Education Action Plan 2029, launched in 2018, promotes better training of educators to use STEM tools in their teaching and train future teachers (Hu, 2024: 77 e 78), while integrating moral values in their practice (Global Times, 2024).

Yet this does not eliminate a series of challenges that any society is facing with the advent of Artificial Intelligence. According to Yang (2021), 70% of what is taught in college can be learned more efficiently by AI. The author considers that this technology has forced Chinese leaders and society, described as a stable and static *status quo*, to revolutionize its education system. In essence, social harmony is now facing new trials.

As a response, the CCO Central Committee and the State Council have already begun to act. In January 2025, the new 2035 education action plan was presented and includes strong political and ideological leadership, talent competitiveness, scientific and technological basis, welfare assurances, social synergy and international influence. Education Vice-minister Wu Yuan stated that in September 2024 that 1673 new



bachelor's degrees were established, while 1670 were suppressed for not being in tune with the PRC's strategic goals and the country's social and economic development. Since 2012, 21000 bachelor's degrees have been created, as opposed to 12000 that were suspended or cancelled in the same period (Xinhua, 2025). In this year's Two Sessions, the discourse focused on innovation and talent attraction capable of producing native technology, while reducing foreign dependency and incorporating Xi's Thought in the education system.

The generation that reached adulthood during XI's time in power (post-1990) has experienced the brunt of China's social issues that are now widespread. The CCP, in its effort to create a social harmony firmly distinct from the West, has used ideology to fuel the fight against child obesity, effeminate masculinity, LGBT movements and feminism. However, the real-world problems that young college graduates tackle daily, from dwindling wages to high unemployment rates, has at times driven the citizens meant to be the future of the country to certain behaviours contrary to what the CCP expects. Cultural and social phenomena, such as "lay flat" or "let it rot" (Lu, 2024), encapsulate the youth's state of desperation and willingness to embrace indifference regarding their future.

Language Policy and Foreign Language Education in China

Language, Ideology, and the Chinese State

Within the ideological apparatus that has long underpinned Chinese education, foreign language instruction occupies a highly strategic position. Rather than representing intercultural openness, it has been governed by the political logics of state-building and ideological regulation, the evolving and shifting priorities of the state, that consistently subordinate linguistic and cultural exchange to national interest, that is, as a means of acquiring useful knowledge to support developmental objectives. (Mao & Min, 2004; Gil, 2016) Ultimately, foreign language education in China is functionally open but ideologically bounded. As Ricento (2006) argues, language policy always reflects underlying power structures.

This relationship is articulated through the concept of 'language import and export' (Pires, 2024), which situates language education within the broader framework of the political economy of language (Grin, 2006) and foreign language planning (Payne, 2007). In this view, foreign languages are imported as strategic resources (Ruíz, 1984) that serve national goals in diplomacy, trade, and technological advancement, yet are carefully managed to prevent ideological disruption. Conversely, exporting national languages functions as a means of projecting soft power and enhancing international status. Through such linguistic exchanges, states seek to accumulate both material and symbolic capital, positioning language not merely as a medium of communication but as an instrument of political influence and global prestige.

As we will see in more detail below, the case of Portuguese language education (PLE) in China exemplifies this dynamic. Introduced in the early 1960s, its institutionalization was driven not by organic academic interest or cultural proximity, but by geopolitical needs



and ideological alignment. Its expansion has tracked closely with China's global positioning and state priorities, from its engagement with Lusophone liberation movements in the Cold War era to its pursuit of new strategic partnerships in the 21st century.

Historical Trajectories: From the 19th Century to 1949

The emergence of foreign language education in China was not the result of voluntary openness but of external pressure (Feng & Adamson, 2019). It began in the 19th century, following a series of military defeats that underscored the need for urgent modernization. Western languages, especially English, became strategic tools for accessing scientific and technical knowledge from abroad. Yet this engagement was deeply ambivalent. While foreign expertise was needed, the threat of ideological subversion loomed large.

The Self-Strengthening Movement of the late Qing period embodied this tension. As Adamson (2002, p. 234) explains, its guiding slogan - "study China for morality, the West for utility" - reflected a model of selective appropriation: foreign languages were embraced only to the extent that they served national development. Language was treated as a neutral medium, stripped of cultural depth, and valued purely for its functional utility. This instrumental logic persisted into the Republican era. According to Feng & Adamson (2019), while government policies encouraged foreign language learning to support scientific and technical advancement, they also coexisted with waves of cultural protectionism and antiforeignism. Throughout this period, language policy privileged strategic benefit over intercultural dialogue, a framework that would carry through the foundational decades of the PRC.

Portuguese Language Education Under the People's Republic

The early decades of the People's Republic saw the consolidation of foreign language education as a state-directed and ideologically mediated endeavour. Portuguese, in particular, entered the curriculum not through linguistic diversity initiatives, but through Cold War-era foreign policy recalibrations, where Russian was initially the privileged language (Ning, 2021). Following the Sino-Soviet split, China intensified engagement with Africa and Latin America, many of whose liberation movements operated in Portuguese. This led to a targeted need for specialists who could serve state objectives abroad.

In 1960, the first formal Portuguese language program was launched at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute, selected for its role in external propaganda rather than linguistic prestige. That same year, the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages initiated a short-term intensive course in Portuguese, later expanded to a full degree. These programs were designed to produce translators, journalists, and diplomats for use in state media and foreign service, often tied directly to ideological dissemination (Li, 2012). Training was also carried out in Macao under the auspices of the Nam Kwong Commercial Company, illustrating the strategic use of external sites for politically aligned language



instruction (Choi, 2012). These efforts culminated in the 1964 “3000 Talents Plan”, a seven-year initiative to build diplomatic translation capacity in key foreign languages.

However, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) brought a dramatic reversal. Foreign languages were recast as vehicles of ideological contamination, and institutions where foreign languages were taught were denounced as counter-revolutionary (Li, 2012). Language programs were suspended, foreign materials banned, and trained professionals side-lined. As Mao & Min (2004) note, this period exemplifies the cyclical, even pendular, nature of Chinese language policy, where moments of pragmatic openness give way to ideological retrenchment.

Rehabilitation of foreign language teaching began cautiously in the 1970s, in tandem with China’s re-entry into global diplomacy. Portuguese programs resumed in Beijing and Shanghai, though their expansion remained limited and ideologically constrained. By the 1990s, Portuguese remained marginal, confined to a few institutions and serving narrowly defined state purposes. As Li (2015) observes, this long stagnation would be abruptly broken in the 2000s by a ‘volcanic eruption’, that is, an explosive growth of the number of students and courses of Portuguese in China’s higher education.

Contemporary Developments and Enduring Structures

The 21st century witnessed a sharp turn in Portuguese language education. Between 2000 and 2020, the number of universities offering Portuguese in Mainland China rose from three to over forty (André, 2019; Pires, 2022; Jatobá, 2020). This shift was catalysed by several overlapping factors: China’s accession to the WTO; the emergence of Brazil and Angola as strategic partners; the founding of Forum Macao in 2003; and new educational policies encouraging universities to diversify their degree offerings (Ye, 2014; Castelo & Ye, 2020). Portuguese suddenly became attractive due to its perceived market value and low initial institutional cost. Yet this growth occurred without a formal guiding policy. As Jatobá (2020, p. 184) argues, it amounted to a “tacit policy”, shaped more by political and economic signals than by educational planning. This flexibility allowed rapid expansion, but also introduced problems of quality control, faculty training, and curricular fragmentation (Ye, 2014; Liu, 2017).

Even as market responsiveness increased, the ideological framing of language education remained intact. Policy documents continued to stress alignment with national priorities. Portuguese was promoted not for its cultural richness, but for its strategic usefulness. Decisions like the 2011 withdrawal of preferential exam policies reinforced the message that language programs would be supported only as long as they served state-defined goals (Liu, 2017). This expansion also revealed structural asymmetries. As of 2023, over half hundred institutions in Mainland China and its SARs offered Portuguese courses (Pires, 2024), with estimates of student enrolment range between 5,100 and 6,400, and about 300 teachers nationwide. (Pires, 2022; Castelo & Ye, 2020). Yet staffing levels, academic qualifications, and postgraduate opportunities vary widely. As of 2020, only 6% of Mainland teachers held doctorates, compared to a more qualified and experienced teaching corps in Macao (Castelo & Ye, 2020).



Macao occupies a pivotal position as both a geopolitical bridge and an academic centre within China's Portuguese language education system. Yet, until 1999, Portuguese was the language of the ruling class, public services and Law (Teixeira e Silva & Lima-Hernandes, 2014, pp. 63 & 64). Cheng (2020, p. 186) states that there was no defined language policy in Macao during Portuguese rule. More than four centuries of rule had only led to the creation of two separate societies. As Cheng (2020, p. 187) further points out:

"(...), the influence of the Portuguese language hardly spread beyond the public domain. In other fields, such as commerce, education and cultural life, Portuguese was not commonly used in Macao society, either because the Portuguese administration deliberately refrained from making Portuguese the official language outside government business, or because governmental inefficiency impeded the expansion of the official language policy beyond the public domain".

However, the local government did make significant advances during the 1990's that greatly impacted Portuguese language teaching to this day. The creation of the University of Macau and the Polytechnic Institute of Macao (now Polytechnic University of Macao) is still seen as having an impact in the competitiveness of those that learn Portuguese (Teixeira e Silva & Lima-Hernandes, 2014, pp. 70). Furthermore, the Macao Special Administrative Region's is based on the Portuguese one. Cheng (2020, p. 197) further states it is necessary for the legal system to remain bilingual, as a way of not only remembering the territory's history but also of protecting the Portuguese language.

Its institutions provide structured professional development for Mainland instructors through master's and doctoral programs, intensive summer training, interpretation courses, and scholarly conferences. These institutions also act as instruments of cultural diplomacy, operationalizing Macao's formal role as China's designated platform for Lusophone cooperation. In this dual capacity, Macao integrates educational leadership with strategic function, aligning language education initiatives with Beijing's broader soft power objectives, particularly within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.

From Language Policy to Ideological Control

Despite quantitative gains, significant challenges remain. The absence of standardized curricula, the uneven distribution of faculty expertise, and reliance on Macao all point to the fragility of the system. As in earlier decades, foreign language education remains a tool of statecraft: flexible in form, but rigid in function. Locals identify more closely with the PRC (Geddes, 2020), an element that is present even among younger generations. Li, Jeong, Wong et. al. (2025, pp. 566 & 567) found that University of Macau students have an easier time accepting the official ideology of the CCP, as well as balancing the existence of a national identity that does not eliminate the presence of a local identity. The authors also signal to the fact the current circumstances are not static:



"Notably, as the Hong Kong and Macao governments actively promote patriotic education, which has been significantly shaped by the official ideology in Mainland China in recent years, this spectrum pattern is better treated as dynamic rather than static, as it may change over time. This spectrum pattern could provide insights for school stakeholders to rethink how to better equip youths for the complex world through patriotic education" (Li Jeong, Wong et. al., 2025, pp. 567 & 568).

Patriotic education, therefore, is viewed as key element to promoting national unity through the Xi Jinping thought. In 2024 the local government announced that new courses would be offered at Macao schools to foster a strong national with China, as well as promote "excellent Chinese culture" (Pereira, 2024; The Macao News, 2024). Then chief executive Ho Iat Seng stated that the Patriotic Education Law would ensure national security and the without it, Macao would not continue in its path of development and solidity (Pereira, 2023). His words have been closely replicated, through calls to use patriotic materials in strengthen Macao's integration with the Greater Bay Area region (Ho, 2025) and to increase education investment as a way of not only spearheading technological development, but also construction of a stable national identity.

Other institutions have responded to the government's push to embrace patriotic education as a crucial part in solidifying Macanese society and integrating into the CCP's *tianxia*. The Women's General Association of Macao, for instance, called the local government to commit to promoting patriotic education among young people (Marques, 2025), as a way a solidifying the patriotic spirit the Macanese people with the framework of the "One Country, Two Systems" (Newsdesk, 2024).

History has been at the core of the discussion. Beijing's intent revolves around creating a narrative that not only reminds Macao and Hong Kong youths of the country's past under foreign oppression but also attempts to generate a stronger sense of belonging to China under the help of the CCP. Production of teaching materials, for instance, was a point of contention. Macao SAR DSEDJ, since 2019, has encouraged schools to adopt history manuals produced by the People's Education Press, a Mainland China publisher. Several academics questioned whether this would limit a more pluralistic comprehension of history (JTM, 2016).

Conclusion

Stemming from centuries of tradition, the CCP has attempted to create a new form of social harmony. Based on Xi's Thought, the PRC intends to create a space where the Communist leadership is placed at the centre. These efforts are not new since 1949 and yet Xi's presidency has pushed ideological and political education further than previous generations of Communist rulers. Universities have been particularly targeted leading to greater insularity from the outside world. Nonetheless, there is still a disconnect between the ideological objectives of the state and the needs and concerns of Chinese youth. High unemployment and a lack of willingness to engage in the "rat race" that is required to



reach a high-status position in society counteract the CCP's intention of having a cohesive force moving in the same direction. Furthermore, greater investment in fields like STEM and AI places greater pressure on language courses to become attractive to young college students.

The case of Portuguese in China exemplifies the intersection between foreign language education and geopolitical strategy. From its marginal beginnings as a tool of diplomatic necessity to its current status as a language of opportunity and employability, Portuguese has found a distinct space within China's linguistic landscape. Its continued success will depend on sustained investment, institutional collaboration, and the evolving priorities of China's engagement with the Lusophone world.

At the same time, this trajectory highlights a critical insight for international language policy: the promotion of a foreign language, whether for cultural outreach, soft power, or commercial gain, cannot be disentangled from the ideological and institutional structures of the host country. In China, where language planning is tightly coupled with political priorities, foreign language education remains a carefully managed enterprise. The development of Portuguese has advanced not through cultural affinity, but through strategic calibration - serving diplomatic, commercial, and ideological functions within China's state-led educational framework. For Portugal, this underscores the need for foreign policy and language promotion strategies that are attuned to the recipient country's political economy and ideological parameters.

In this regard, Macao holds particular relevance. As both a symbolic link and an operational platform, Macao facilitates the linguistic and institutional bridge between China and the Lusophone world. Its comparative academic strength, cultural familiarity, and geopolitical positioning make it a critical node for expanding Portuguese language education in East Asia. More broadly, the case of Portuguese in China offers a window into the complex interplay between language, ideology, and international relations, an interplay that defines, and will continue to shape, the evolving dynamic between Portugal, China, and the wider Lusophone sphere.

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