



New models, old patterns? The implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for Chinese



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ABSTRACT

The last few years have seen a change in the paradigm of language teaching and learning with the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In Spain, the CEFR has been implemented for Chinese in the same standardised way as for other languages. This over-strict implementation has not taken into account the particularities of Chinese. Consequently, Chinese has often been distorted in academic curricula to adapt it to this new approach. We question the application of European models to Chinese and the assumption that those models are universally valid, requiring no adjustments. We believe that this assumption reproduces old ways of approaching the Other, based on ethnocentrism, and perpetuates old myths and an orientalist discourse about the Chinese language, which have been criticised for decades by some linguists and should be a thing of the past. We critically analyse current adaptations of the CEFR to Chinese in Spain and suggest alternatives to the prevailing trends in scholarship on Chinese linguistics. We can thus establish models that do not reproduce old-fashioned patterns and attitudes and that enable us to describe Chinese in its own terms.

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Introduction

The last few years have seen a change in the paradigm of language teaching and learning with the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). Although it was initially intended to be implemented only for European languages, and was therefore developed in a certain political and educational context, the new model has not been confined merely to European languages, but has also been applied to all the non-European languages studied in Europe, including Chinese.

The implementation of the CEFR has sought to standardise language teaching without always taking into account the particularities of each language. This does not seem to have caused problems for European languages, but it has resulted in different implementation proposals for non-European languages (such as Chinese), for which the model is not adapted.

We have chosen Spain as a case study because in the Eurobarometer survey on languages published by the [European Commission \(2012\)](#), 24% of respondents in Spain said they viewed Chinese as a useful language for their children to learn. This

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figure is higher than the European average (14%), and second only to English among respondents in Spain. As the perceived importance of Chinese has risen, the number of university degrees that include Chinese in the syllabus has risen drastically, as has the number of people studying it. This new scenario shaped by current changes therefore provides us with the perfect opportunity to reflect on past practices and establish models that do not reproduce old-fashioned patterns and attitudes. Moreover, we can provide an interesting, extensive overview of the subject in Spain because proposals to apply the CEFR to Chinese are available for various levels of education in the country. Finally, another reason we chose Spain for our case study is because we had observed that in this country the CEFR had been applied to Chinese in the same standardised way as it had for other languages, sometimes – in our opinion – in too strict a manner. Consequently, not only have the particularities of Chinese been ignored but also the Chinese language has often been distorted in academic syllabuses to adapt it to this new approach.

Adapting an alien model to Chinese can lead to practices that contribute to perpetuating an erroneous, misinformed and to a certain extent orientalist discourse about the language. This discourse unquestioningly reproduces an attitude some experts have been denouncing for decades (see Casas-Tost & Rovira-Esteva, 2009; DeFrancis, 1984; Hannas, 1997; Unger, 2004). In this context of change within the field of language teaching and specifically of the teaching of Chinese in Spain, we question once again the applicability of European models to Chinese and the assumption that the models are universally valid, requiring no adjustments. This assumption reproduces old ways of approaching the Other, reflecting an ethnocentrism and, in this specific case, reproducing an artificial view of similarity among languages. The assumption is made as a result of disinformation and educational administrators' desire to impose a single, homogeneous model on all languages, without taking into account any differences among those languages. Consequently, old myths and mistakes about Chinese are perpetuated.

The main objective of this article is to contribute to the debate about how the CEFR should be implemented for Chinese, taking Spain as a case study. We will begin by briefly reflecting on the ideological implications behind apparently neutral academic approaches. We will then provide some general information about the educational context that has shaped language teaching in Europe over the last decade. Next, we will present the Spanish proposals for adapting the CEFR to Chinese, while also discussing Chinese proposals. Finally, we will offer a qualitative analysis of the published curricula, and then in the conclusions we will offer some suggestions on how to improve them.

Old myths, old models

The implementation of the CEFR has reproduced old myths and models for Chinese in two specific ways. First, a European model is once again being applied as if it were universally valid. Since this linguistic model is not adapted to the linguistic diversity of the world but revolves around a linguistic Eurocentrism, it leads to a deformed vision of Chinese and other non-European languages. This Eurocentrism has already been denounced by Gil (2000, p. 173) as a major limitation of Western linguistic theory:

[C]ontemporary theories and frameworks do not provide the appropriate tools for a satisfactory description of such 'exotic' languages. In general, available theories are of European origin, reflecting the peculiar properties of the particular European languages familiar to their progenitors. Often, their application to languages spoken in other parts of the world is an exercise in Eurocentricity, involving the unwarranted imposition of categories and structures that are simply irrelevant.

Shi-xu (2006, p. 385) uses similar terminology but writes about the general academic culture. He reflects that 'when solely Western frameworks, with their inherent values and interests, are applied to the Chinese context, it is not hard to imagine the sort of conclusion that the research can lead to'.

We should not be surprised to find that the application of inadequate, alien models to Chinese has given rise to paradoxes. For example, some descriptive grammars of Chinese exclude grammatical categories because they are absent from (or rare in) European languages. Thus, specific proposals for Chinese resulting from the implementation of the CEFR without the necessary adjustments completely distort certain categories or linguistic phenomena.

Second, the old myths and models are also being reproduced by the official CEFR documentation, which explicitly reflects the age-old ideographic myth, the idea that Chinese characters represent concepts without any reference to their pronunciation. While it is true that Chinese writing has a pictographic origin and the semantic component is important in the formation of characters, the phonetic component is also relevant, and Chinese writing transmits meanings through sounds, despite the imperfections of the system. A document noting the characteristics and importance of the CEFR should not, therefore, contain statements such as the following:

The writing systems of all European languages are based on the alphabetic principle, though those of some other languages follow an ideographic (logographic) principle (e.g. Chinese). (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 117)

We should not forget the political motivations behind the CEFR, which include respect for the identity of minorities and European cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as the development of tolerant and democratic citizenship. We should expect these same values to be applied to our academic and professional activity. Upholding these values requires a more open-minded and respectful attitude towards different academic traditions that have their own ways of analysing and

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