



INFLUENCE OF CHINESE MOVIES IN EAST AFRICA ON LEARNING CHINESE LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

China's recent developments in media and film in Africa have changed over the last decade. Chinese Movies have become increasingly popular in African media and Chinese-based television networks in Africa like CCTV (rebranded as CGTN in 2016). The viewership numbers of Chinese movies remain uncertain and the influence of Chinese movies on African Chinese cultural interactions and learning of Chinese language remains unknown. Chinese movies are a major source of China's soft power in Africa since they act as conveyors of Chinese cultural values to African Nations. They are an unofficial and formidable source of China's global influence on the adoption of Chinese culture in African nations. Chinese movies have been noted to add diverse sources and voices for African perspectives. There is also increased interaction between Chinese and local African media staff who are working together on a daily basis. A recent Chinese movie for 2017 was "[Wolf Warrior 2](#)" which was filmed in parts of South Africa, the movie centered on a war hero who defends medical aid workers in a fictitious African country. The movie reflected the increasing influence of Chinese presence in Africa, including the aspect of language. China's role in the African film industry is increasing in various ways. One is the establishment of shared film festivals, such as the [China-Africa International Film Festival](#) launched in 2017. Second, South African filmmakers are being awarded scholarships to study in China, for instance at the Beijing Film Academy. Finally, Chinese films are providing platforms for developing China-Africa narratives. Against this background, it is evident that China is slowly but surely becoming a noteworthy player in the African film industry. However, what remains to be seen is whether its engagement in the film can motivate deeper interaction between Chinese and Africans and mostly influence African communities to learn the Chinese language, thereby expanding its soft power. The main objective of this paper is therefore to determine the influence of Chinese movies in East Africa on learning the Chinese language. The paper will specifically determine how Chinese movies influence Chinese

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African cultural interactions, and how these influence the learning of the Chinese language amongst East African communities. The study adopted an in-depth literature review analysis. This involved reviewing and compiling information from past reference materials such as journals, media, books and other published materials on Chinese movies, Chinese and African cultural interaction and learning of the Chinese language. Literature has shown that Chinese movies are becoming an integral part of daily television content among many households in East Africa. Popular Sino dramas and movies have dotted East African screens, having Chinese subtitles or Chinese narrations supported by the local (Swahili) language. Customization of Chinese martial arts films has also helped the spread of the Chinese language. Chinese media needs to be marketed and content re-engineered to the daily lives of Africans to gain more attention. Through the available Chinese movies, Africans have gained knowledge and comprehension of Mandarin.

Keywords: Chinese movies, cultural interaction, Chinese language

1. Introduction

Language has been extensively used by leading world powers to exert soft power, create social connections and promote commerce. The concept of teaching language to foreign societies to increase cooperation and exercise soft power is exemplified by the spread of French and English languages in Africa. At this level, the Chinese government and community understand that there is a need for African countries to learn their language for easy communication and integration into the host culture. Since teaching the Chinese language to the African people is critical, approaches adopted to help spread the language include establishing the Confucius Institute across many countries and using movies, films and songs. Chinese films and movies have been used to spread the language into the African continent. But why the Chinese movies and films?

Movies have for the last decades been used for entertaining and learning. Second-language acquisition needs motivation and assistance from multiple sources to comprehend. Second-language learners usually find films and television programs an integral part of student's lives bringing them into language classrooms. The use of film makes learning a foreign language enjoyable, with the option of using the actors, scenes and other important milestones in the film to master the language. The Chinese films portray famous characters that through them, Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) can comprehend and master its speaking.

Films provide authentic as well as varied forms of learning a foreign language. Chinese films provide learners with examples of words that are used in "real" situations outside classrooms, especially in interactive forms like real-life conversations. Through using Chinese films, learners are able to master the natural flow of speech as well as natural expressions. The visual context given by the films enables the learners to interpret the visual expressions as well as gestures simultaneously, further improving the comprehension of the foreign language (Gil, 2014). Films also extend the teaching

techniques and resources improving the four communicative skills; listening, reading, speaking and writing. The films also act as a springboard for follow-up tasks like debates and discussions on social issues, reconstructing a dialogue, role plays and even summarizing a learning context. The rich visual contexts of Chinese films and movies enable learners to relate the scenes and actions to the language used, providing a platform to learn. From the many benefits of using movies to learn Chinese, what has previous literature said about using films and movies to learn a foreign language, in this case, Mandarin?

There have been debates on the effectiveness and shortcomings of using films for teaching Chinese and any foreign language. While the majority of scholars like Iwasaki (2011), Ismaili (2013) and Osuka (2007) support the use of filmography for integrated learning of Chinese and other foreign languages, others like Hirano and Matsumoto (2011), and Ishimaki and Saunders (2015) quote the discrepancies in the size of study groups, and the methodologies used in teaching. Scholars supporting the use of films to enhance foreign language comprehension point out that the learners are more intrinsically motivated to study on their own time and terms as they use the film as a reference. Studies focusing on second language (L2) acquisitions are more likely to narrow down to a single skill area, like listening, limiting the extent to which an L2 learner can comprehend. The form of learning advocated for in films is usually limited to select movies that explicitly show a form of language skills needed for the specific group.

Shambaugh (2015) presenting a paper on China's soft-power push in search for respect, argued that Beijing was projecting her good image to the world (and specifically to Africa) through the use of films and the Chinese language. For instance, the 17th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committed to increasing its soft power through good Chinese narratives and portraying a good image of the Chinese people. The Chinese projects in Africa were then instructed to use all media platforms, including videos and filmography to communicate the good image of the Chinese people. The communication in such project filmography is translated to English from Chinese, promoting the learning of the language.

There has been increasing collaboration between African filmmakers and their Chinese counterparts. For instance, the *New China* online tablet reports an initiative where the Chinese government is increasingly spending on promoting the African film industry (Huaxia, 2018). For instance, the Cape Town International Film Market & Festival (CTIFMF), a renowned filmmaker in Pretoria, collaborated with the China-Africa International Film Festival (CAIFF) to have a five-year deal to strengthen cultural exchanges between Africa and China. The collaboration is most responsible for the language training and cultural exchange between the two, thus promoting the learning of the Chinese language. The 2018 CTIFMF in Pretoria screened five Chinese films that further promoted the learning of the Mandarin language among Africans (Huaxia, 2018).

2. Summary of Findings

Recent famous movies like *Wolf Warrior 2* show how Chinese influence is increasing in Africa using movies. The 2017 Chinese film was shot in both African and Chinese locations, instilling the importance of the African people and heritage. Through showing African scenes like Alexandria and Soweto, the movie uses English narrations while at the bottom showing the Chinese translations, promoting the learning of the language. The film is an example of how Chinese films have entered the global market, as it was selected among the Best Foreign Language Film during the 90th Academy Awards. The main actor in *War Wolf 2*, Leng Feng, is captured protecting medical aid workers in an African area with rebels, as well as plenty of vicious arms dealers. The narration of the movie points to the increasing interest in Africa where the Chinese have a special economic focus that must be supported by soft power elements like the Mandarin language. The scenario of Leng Feng handling the Somali pirates and the use of the local language points to the increasing interaction of the Chinese language and the African languages and her people. The inclusion of Somalia, Sudan, Egypt, and South Africa in the movie indicates the importance of the Chinese language among the locals in fostering future interactions with the emerging world economic power. International pundits of the movie like Evan Osnos and the *Los Angeles Times* concluded that it was another of Xi's ideas and Chinese nationalism ideas of rejuvenation towards capturing Africa.

The enduring popularity in Africa of Chinese Kung Fu movies pushes the narration of the importance of movies in promoting the Mandarin language and culture (Olander, 2016). The CCP (Chinese Community Party) has CCTV which runs official programs in Kenya and other East African countries. The TV program has movies that use simple Chinese to promote the adoption and embracing of the culture. The CCP has also invested in local editions of the newspaper, China Daily in South Africa as well as the local radio programs announced by China Radio International (CRI) that both promote the Chinese language and culture. CRI uses more radio skits that explain the contemporary Chinese language in daily use. While it might be difficult to estimate the listenership and viewership of the Chinese satellite and cable TV channels, one genre of Hong Kong-produced movies, Kung Fu still reigned the movies for several decades (Qi & Lemmer, 2014). The movies have focused on legends like Bruce Lee, Jet Li, Jackie Chan, Wu Jing and Donnie Yen to advance the Chinese language and cultural themes. The focus on Chinese martial arts in Africa especially in East Africa has gained viewership, increasing the opportunities for learning and appreciating the Chinese language.

Kenya stands out among the East African countries in absorbing Chinese movies, with customized translations done by *DJ Afro*. *DJ Afro* has created a niche in interpreting and promoting Chinese martial arts movies that come along with Chinese subtitles. The movies have gained market and popularity among young movie addicts who like Chinese martial arts and actions. While mainland China (People's Republic of China) may not have produced the famous and celebrated actors as Hong Kong has, the fact remains that the Chinese language is extensively promoted by the martial artists' movies produced and marketed in Hong Kong (Olander, 2016). *DJ Afro* is famous for promoting

actors like Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-Fat, Donnie Yen, Jet Li, Yuen Biao, Sammo Hung and Michelle Yeoh in locally translated movies that enable the viewers to relate the actions in the movie with the language of the subtitles. The increasing spread of Chinese movies in Kenya as promoted by the local DJs ensures the language gets to people.

Another increasing concern is how the Chinese government has invested in research centers for African films and televisions. For instance, in 2015, a research center on African film was opened at Zhejiang Normal University to further cooperation and understanding between China and Africa. The center has attracted academic exchanges with East African institutions, promoting the creation of TV content (including movies) that relates to Chinese culture. One challenge acknowledged by Chinese scholar, Liu Hongwu of Zhejiang Normal University was the limited understanding of Africa by the Chinese people and vice versa. The Africans also viewed China as a source of food and martial arts and not movies and other non-martial films. The collaboration has seen an increase in the airing of Chinese TV comedy series in Kenya and Tanzania. The Chinese digital set box company, StarTimes has a presence in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Nigeria and South Africa among other countries. The pay-TV operator has spread to thirty African countries with over twenty million users. The coverage of the population in Kenya and Tanzania by StarTimes is over 60%, making the spread of Chinese movies easy. StarTimes provides over 30 Chinese TV series that use both local languages (Swahili) and Chinese.

Mengzhen and Le (2019) argue that dubbing TV and movies from the Chinese language into the local language has become a rewarding career for interpreters. For instance, Happiness Lulikela is a popular Tanzanian actor who has mastered dubbing Chinese dramas into Swahili, promoting the learning of a foreign language. Chinese dramas have become popular in East Africa with a mixture of local and Chinese characters. Along with the Belt and Road Initiative, language experts have accompanied construction personnel to promote the use of the Chinese language. The advertisements on social media and mainstream media (TV and radio) have promoted the Chinese language and culture. TV series on StarTimes have often shown Chinese food, cooking and socialization, prompting interested persons to know more about the culture and language. The TV series also point to different sociocultural backgrounds with movies showing Chinese men helping women to great lengths like cooking, washing and other household activities that East African men would consider feminine. Gender roles thus promote language acquisition in terms of understanding family and associated relationships.

Mobile Cinema, a component driven by pay-TV StarTimes, has gained thousands of viewers across Eastern and Central African countries, Tanzania, the Republic of Congo, Zambia and Senegal. The mobile cinema shows Chinese-related content that is presented in the local language with Chinese subtitles, promoting Sino-content consumption (Aiqing, 2018). The film screen tours rural villages granting the locals chances to watch Chinese movies for free. Through mobile cinemas, people can learn some Chinese words thus gaining attention on the foreign language. Sensitization about the need to know and use Chinese in many settings has thus pushed many interested

parties to seek movies to learn the language and culture. The mobile cinemas have also invested in other movie genres like animations, romance and fantasy movies in addition to the popular Kung Fu action films. Some of the popular Chinese TV dramas (movies) promoted Kung Fu on the mobile cinema were *Across the Ocean to See You* and *The Temptation to Go Home* (Aiqing, 2018).

The investment in digital pay TV (like StarTimes), China Daily and other online tablets have spread the movie culture to new African audiences. For instance, programs broadcasted by StarTimes in Tanzania have a huge following as they show Chinese actors speaking fluent Swahili. One of the TV dramas enjoying great popularity is *The Beautiful Daughter-in-Law Era* which is played in prime time. The programs have opened opportunities for Tanzanians and other East Africans to learn the Chinese language and culture (Defang, 2015). In Uganda, Sino-drama addicts praise the film, *Let's Get Married* which shows how Chinese people handle family and social problems. Other popular movies that have Swahili translations from Mandarin in East Africa include "*Struggle*," "*Beijing Youth*," and "*Jintailang's Happy Life*." The family-themed Sino movies have promoted the learning of Chinese among local families in East Africa (Defang, 2015).

3. Conclusion

Movies present a great opportunity for L2 learners to comprehend and sharpen their four language skills (speaking, writing, listening and reading). Movies promote learning by creating real scenarios. Watching movies enables one to relate to the cast, their language, and their culture. Africa and China have increased their collaborations in making films among other sectors. There have been several approaches movies have been used to promote learning of Chinese language.

Producing Africa-centered movies like *Wolf Warrior 2* has won many awards because of its uniqueness and tapping of local talents. The Chinese films have also promoted local sceneries, and local dialects and marketing the continent and its people in China. The popular Kung Fu movies provide Chinese narrations with Chinese actors. The popular actors, language and art have gained popularity to the extent of influencing the learning of the Chinese language. Kenya has stand-out players in promoting the Chinese language in movies, with the example of *DJ Afro* who translates Chinese into local dialects (both Swahili and Sheng'). The popular *DJ Afro* Chinese movies have greatly influenced the local youths to know Chinese characters, language, family life and martial arts. The Chinese government has also invested in media (film) research centers that promote collaboration between Chinese and African institutions. The films promote the exchange of cultures, including learning of the Chinese by Africans. The use of Chinese pay-TV StarTimes has greatly enhanced the watching of Chinese content through movies, dramas and short films. The film screen tours in rural villages have further endeared the Chinese language and content to the rural Africans.

3.1 Recommendations

The role of Sino-African movies cannot be ignored in shaping the learning and acquisition of the Chinese language. There is a need to adopt measures that promote efficient learning of the Sino language among East Africans. The use of movies and tele dramas has spurred interest in learning Mandarin while the use of mixed languages, that is, both Chinese and Swahili promotes easy comprehension of the foreign language.

Making Sino movies interesting to the target audience makes the content reach a larger population. For instance, using family and romantic as key themes in the movies is likely to attract more audience, who will then learn Chinese in the process.

Promotion of Chinese movies is recommended as the local viewers have traditional favorites, including local productions, and Mexican and Philippine soaps. The attention of the exotic content given to the last two categories is the resonance with the daily lives and cultural semblance that relates to the common viewer. Promotion of the movies, selection of the right themes and marketing to East Africans is likely to increase the consumption of Sino movies.

The use of simple Mandarin in the movies, as sub-titles as well as spoken clearly is likely to encourage viewers to learn and comprehend the language. Spoken Chinese needs to be accompanied by actions to enable viewers to relate the actions with words. The use of Sino movies in Africa has increased owing to the vicious intention of the Chinese government to wield soft power that is missing in the economic and infrastructural initiatives fronted by the rejuvenated Chinese regime. In conclusion, movies present great potential for the Chinese government to translate her culture and language to the people in East Africa.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work.

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