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International Journal on Research and Development – A Management Review

ISSN: 2319 - 5479

Volume 15 Issue 01, 2026

China-Africa Educational Diplomacy: A Critical Analysis of Mandarin Mandates in African University Programs – A Case of the University of Malawi

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Peer Review Information

Submission: 12 April 2026

Revision: 28 April 2026

Acceptance: 07 May 2026

Keywords

China-Africa Relations, Educational Diplomacy, Mandarin Mandates, Malawian Universities, Language Policy, Soft Power

Abstract

Over the past twenty years, China's educational diplomacy in Africa has grown quickly, and teaching Mandarin has become a noticeable part of university life across the continent. This paper takes a close, critical look at how Mandarin language requirements, formal or otherwise operate within the University of Malawi and other Malawian universities. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study draws on policy documents, university prospectuses, Confucius Institute annual reports, and secondary literature from three public institutions: the University of Malawi (UNIMA), Mzuzu University (MZUNI), and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR). What emerges from the analysis is that no Malawian university currently forces students to learn Mandarin as a condition for graduation. However, three softer but still powerful pressures are at work: scholarships that require Chinese proficiency, infrastructure projects funded by China that give Mandarin a privileged place on campus, and signals from the job market that encourage students to enroll in Chinese classes, sometimes at the expense of other languages. The paper argues that these "soft mandates" reveal an imbalance of diplomatic power between Malawi and China, raise real concerns about teacher training and learning materials, and undermine local educational decision-making by favoring a foreign language over others, including French. Recommendations include making language-related conditions in bilateral agreements more transparent, designing curricula based on actual labor market needs, bringing local languages into university language policies, and conducting more qualitative research with students and teachers. Ultimately, this case sheds light on a wider tension in African higher education: the struggle between forming international partnerships and holding onto educational sovereignty.

Introduction

1. Background

Over the last two decades, the People's Republic of China has become Africa's biggest bilateral trading partner, a major builder of infrastructure, and an increasingly powerful voice in higher education across the continent (King, 2013). Through platforms like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Confucius Institutes, government scholarship programs, and direct university partnerships, China has steadily promoted Mandarin as a strategic language for the twenty-first century. Between 2018 and 2021 alone, FOCAC promised 10,000 scholarships and 50,000 training spots for African students (FOCAC, 2018). These offers

come with both clear and hidden expectations about learning Chinese.

Malawi; a small, landlocked country in southeastern Africa offers a particularly revealing look at this educational diplomacy. The country established diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China in December 2007, after switching recognition from the Republic of China (Taiwan) (Haugen, 2013). This diplomatic shift was followed by a wave of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects: the Malawi Parliament building, the Karonga-Chitipa road, and several university library and laboratory complexes. Against this broader backdrop of diplomacy and development, Mandarin language instruction found its way into Malawian university classrooms.

2. The Research Problem

Even though Confucius Institutes and Mandarin courses are now visible at several Malawian universities, very little systematic research has looked closely at what kind of language requirements or mandates actually exist within these programs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some students feel pressure, whether obvious or subtle, to study Chinese. Parents and policymakers have started asking questions: Is Mandarin becoming compulsory? What happens to students who refuse to take Chinese? How do these language mandates, if they really exist, fit with Malawi's national language policy and educational priorities? So far, the academic literature has left these questions largely unanswered.

3. A Vignette: The Student's Dilemma

Think about Grace, a third-year agriculture student at LUANAR. She does not particularly want to study Chinese. Her real passion is Malawian crop science and agricultural extension. But her department recently signed a memorandum of understanding with a Chinese agricultural university, and the Confucius Institute on campus offers a Mandarin course that is "highly recommended." The Chinese government scholarship she hopes to apply for next year requires HSK Level 3 proficiency. Her professor also mentions that Chinese construction companies hiring graduates prefer applicants who know basic Mandarin. So Grace enrolls in the course — not because she wants to, but because the system pushes her in that direction. Her story, which appeared anonymously in a student magazine (The Poly Post, 2022), is not unusual. It captures exactly what this paper is about: the workings of soft mandates.

4. Research Questions

This paper is guided by three main questions:

1. To what extent do Mandarin language mandates whether formal or informal — exist in Malawian university programs?
2. What mechanisms create and sustain these mandates?
3. What do these mandates mean educationally, diplomatically, and ethically for Malawian students and institutions?

5. Significance and Scope

This study matters for three reasons. First, it fills a clear gap in the research: no peer-reviewed study has critically examined Mandarin mandates specifically in Malawian universities (Namasinga, 2021). Second, it contributes to larger debates about China-Africa educational diplomacy, soft power, and language policy in postcolonial settings. Third, it offers practical advice for university administrators and policymakers trying to navigate China-Africa partnerships. The scope is limited to three public universities that offer Mandarin instruction, and the main method is documentary analysis.

6. Paper Structure

After this introduction, Section 2 reviews what existing research says about China-Africa educational diplomacy, Mandarin mandates, and higher education in Malawi. Section 3 explains the methodology. Section 4 presents the findings, organized by theme. Section 5 discusses those findings in relation to theoretical frameworks and comparisons with other countries. Section 6 offers recommendations. Section 7 concludes with limitations and directions for future research.

Literature Review

1. China-Africa Educational Diplomacy: Concepts and Debates

Educational diplomacy means using educational exchanges, language teaching, institutional partnerships, and scholarships to advance foreign policy goals (Li, 2018). Unlike traditional diplomacy which works through embassies and treaties; educational diplomacy operates inside classrooms, through curricula, and across cultural encounters. China has made educational diplomacy a core part of its "soft power" strategy in Africa (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Scholarly opinions on China-Africa educational diplomacy are divided. One view emphasizes mutual benefit and South-South cooperation. Supporters argue that China gives African students and universities access to resources, expertise, and networks that were previously

unavailable through Western-dominated institutions (Alden & Large, 2019). From this angle, Mandarin instruction is a practical response to China's growing economic role: African students who learn Chinese gain an edge in trade, construction, manufacturing, and diplomacy.

A second, more critical view highlights unequal power relations, dependency, and neocolonial patterns. Critics say China's educational investments often come with strings attached, sometimes obvious (like mandatory Chinese courses), sometimes hidden (like hiring Chinese faculty instead of local ones) (Mohan & Lampert, 2013). Han (2017) warns that the rapid spread of Confucius Institutes across Africa risks repeating the kind of linguistic imperialism that earlier European colonial powers practiced, albeit with Chinese characteristics. This paper places itself within that critical tradition, while trying to add nuance by paying close attention to local contexts.

2. Mandarin Mandates: Definitions, Mechanisms, and Debates

A "Mandarin mandate" can be understood as any policy, practice, or structural pressure that forces or strongly pushes students to study Chinese. Mandates exist along a spectrum:

- Formal mandates: Official university or government policies that require Mandarin for admission, progression, or graduation.
- Soft mandates: Indirect pressures, such as scholarship eligibility rules, employer preferences, institutional recommendations, and infrastructure decisions that give Mandarin an advantage over other languages.

The existing literature documents both types across Africa. In Rwanda, for example, Mandarin is an elective but is heavily promoted through bilateral scholarship agreements (Gonzalez, 2020). In Kenya, Confucius Institutes have woven Mandarin into technical and vocational programs without making it officially compulsory (King, 2013). In South Africa, some universities offer Mandarin for credit but face student resistance when the pressure to enroll becomes too strong (Han, 2017).

Scholars disagree about how seriously to take soft mandates. Some argue that as long as students have formal choice, there is no ethical problem (Li, 2018). Others contend that soft mandates can be more insidious than formal ones because they work through structural pressure rather than transparent rules (Bacchi, 2009). A student who "chooses" Mandarin because scholarships require it is not really exercising free choice in any meaningful sense. This paper adopts Bacchi's (2009) critical policy analysis framework, which asks not just what policies do, but what problems they assume and what alternatives they ignore.

3. The Malawian Higher Education Context

Malawi has four public universities: the University of Malawi (UNIMA), Mzuzu University (MZUNI), Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR), and the Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences (MUBAS). There are also several private universities, including the Catholic University of Malawi and the University of Livingstonia. English is the official language of instruction across all institutions a legacy of British colonialism (Kayambazinthu, 1998). Chichewa serves as the national lingua franca and is spoken by more than 60% of the population as a first or second language.

Language policy in Malawian higher education has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. Banda (2009) notes a persistent hierarchy: English sits at the top as the language of power, prestige, and international communication; Chichewa holds a secondary place as a language of national identity and everyday interaction; other Malawian languages (Chitumbuka, Chiyao, Chilomwe) are mostly pushed to the margins. Into this hierarchy, Mandarin has recently been inserted as a "strategic foreign language" without any corresponding boost for local languages.

Confucius Institutes operate at UNIMA and LUANAR. They offer non-degree Mandarin courses, cultural activities, and HSK preparation. According to their annual reports, enrollment has grown steadily from about 200 students in 2015 to over 800 in 2022 (CI-UNIMA, 2022). But completion rates are not reported, and no one has measured how much proficiency students actually gain.

4. Research Gap and Contribution

Despite growing interest in China-Africa educational relations, no peer-reviewed study has systematically examined Mandarin mandates in Malawian universities. Existing research on Malawi focuses on infrastructure, trade, or political relations, not language policy (Haugen, 2013; Chilemba, 2021). Studies of Mandarin in Africa tend to concentrate on larger economies like Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa (Gonzalez, 2020). This paper fills that gap by offering the first critical analysis of Mandarin mandates in the Malawian university context.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2018), with embedded units of analysis. The "case" is China-Africa educational diplomacy as it appears in Malawian university language policies. The embedded units are three public universities: UNIMA, MZUNI, and LUANAR. A single-case design is appropriate here because Malawi represents a "revelatory case" (Yin, 2018, p. 48) a context that has never been examined before in the literature on Mandarin mandates.

2. Data Sources

Because this is an exploratory study and fieldwork was not possible, the data come from publicly available documents:

1. University policy documents: Prospectuses, strategic plans, and curriculum guides from 2019 to 2024 for UNIMA, MZUNI, and LUANAR.
2. Confucius Institute materials: Annual reports (2019–2022), student handbooks, and promotional brochures from CI-UNIMA and CI-LUANAR.
3. Government documents: Ministry of Education circulars, FOCAC action plans, and Chinese government white papers on education.
4. Secondary literature: Peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and reputable media reports on China-Malawi relations.
5. Student media: Editorials and articles from university student magazines where available.

3. Analytical Framework

The data are analyzed using Bacchi's (2009) "What's the problem represented to be?" (WPR) approach. This framework asks six questions:

1. What is the "problem" represented to be in a given policy or practice?
2. What assumptions underlie this representation?
3. How has this representation emerged?
4. What is silenced or left unproblematic?
5. What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced?
6. How can the representation be challenged or changed?

In this study, the WPR framework is applied to documents that describe or justify Mandarin instruction. The goal is not to take policy claims at face value, but to critically examine the problem constructions that Mandarin mandates assume.

4. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it relies entirely on documentary analysis; interviews with students, faculty, and policymakers would have provided richer data. Second, access to internal university documents such as minutes from academic board meetings was not possible. Third, documents written in Chinese were not analyzed due to language constraints. Fourth, the study does not include private universities. These limitations are acknowledged, and the findings are presented as exploratory rather than definitive.

5. Ethical Considerations

All documents analyzed are publicly available. No human subjects were involved, so institutional review board approval was not required. However, the study follows ethical principles of transparency, accuracy, and respect for institutional contexts.

Findings

1. Prevalence of Formal Mandarin Mandates

The document analysis shows that no Malawian university has a formal Mandarin graduation requirement. Neither UNIMA, MZUNI, nor LUANAR lists Mandarin among its compulsory courses in published prospectuses or curriculum guides. At MZUNI, Mandarin is not offered at all as a credit-bearing course, though occasional cultural workshops happen through informal arrangements. At UNIMA, Mandarin courses are offered through the Confucius Institute but are labeled "extracurricular" or "elective" rather than part of the core curriculum. LUANAR similarly lists Mandarin as an elective option for agriculture and business students.

Table 1: Mandarin Provision in Malawian Public Universities (2024)

University	Mandarin Offered	Formal Mandate	Confucius Institute	Notes
UNIMA	YES	NO	YES	extracurricular,
MZUNI	NO	NO	NO	Occasional
LUANAR	YES	NO	YES	Recommended

This finding is significant. Contrary to what many people assume, Malawian universities have not formally required Chinese language study. But as the next sections show, the absence of formal mandates does not mean the absence of pressure.

2. Mechanisms of Soft Mandates

Three distinct mechanisms of soft mandates emerge from the document analysis.

Mechanism 1: Scholarship Conditionality

Chinese government scholarships including the prestigious Chinese Government Scholarship (CSC) and the Belt and Road Scholarship require international applicants to demonstrate Chinese language proficiency. The CSC application guidelines state clearly: "Applicants whose previous degree was not taught in Chinese must submit HSK Level 3 certificate (or higher) for undergraduate programs, and HSK Level 4 for graduate programs" (Ministry of Education China, 2020, p. 5).

Malawian universities actively promote these scholarships to students. A Confucius Institute student handbook says: "Students who complete HSK Level 3 through our program become eligible for over 500 Chinese government scholarships annually" (CI-UNIMA, 2022, p. 8). While not a formal mandate, this creates strong pressure: students who want access to Chinese-funded opportunities must study Mandarin. Given the limited number of scholarships from traditional Western donors, many Malawian students feel they have no real choice.

Mechanism 2: Infrastructure Diplomacy

China-funded infrastructure projects on Malawian university campuses include language labs, library extensions, and classroom blocks specifically designated for Mandarin instruction. The UNIMA library extension, funded by the Chinese government, houses a "Confucius Institute Resource Centre" equipped with Chinese books, computers loaded with Mandarin software, and dedicated teaching space. The university's strategic plan notes: "The China-aided facility has enhanced our capacity to offer international languages" (UNIMA, 2019, p. 12).

Setting aside physical space for Mandarin while not a mandate sends a clear signal about institutional priorities. No comparable facility exists for Chichewa or other Malawian languages. This material preference for Mandarin creates an implicit hierarchy that pushes students and faculty to see Chinese as more valuable than local languages.

Mechanism 3: Job Market Signaling

An analysis of job advertisements from Chinese companies operating in Malawi shows a clear preference for Mandarin-speaking graduates. For example, a 2021 recruitment notice from Malawi-Malawi Joint Construction (MMJC) stated: "Candidates with basic Mandarin communication skills will be given priority" (cited in Chilemba, 2021, p. 462). Similarly, the Malawi Chinese Chamber of Commerce's annual report recommends that member companies "consider language proficiency in recruitment decisions" (MCCC, 2020, p. 14).

University career offices have taken notice. A LUANAR career guidance document advises agriculture students: "Chinese companies are major buyers of Malawian tobacco and tea. Learning Mandarin improves your employability" (LUANAR Careers Office, 2021, p. 3). Again, this is not a formal mandate, but it works as an indirect pressure mechanism.

3. Stakeholder Narratives and Contestations

The documents reveal competing stories about Mandarin instruction.

Pro-Mandarin narratives emphasize economic opportunity and diplomatic friendship. A Confucius Institute annual report states: "Mandarin opens doors to China's booming economy. Our students gain competitive advantage in agriculture, business, and engineering. China-Malawi friendship grows stronger through language learning" (CI-UNIMA, 2021, p. 5). This narrative presents the "problem" as Malawian students lacking access to Chinese opportunities, with Mandarin instruction as the solution.

Critical narratives appear mostly in student media and occasional opinion pieces. A UNIMA student magazine editorial asked bluntly: "Why are we learning Chinese when our own Chichewa is absent from the curriculum? How many Malawian students will actually work in China? This is diplomacy, not education" (The Poly Post, 2022, p. 3). This editorial frames a different "problem": the sidelining of local languages and the use of education for diplomatic ends.

Silenced perspectives are also notable. No document in the analysis addresses the pedagogical challenges of teaching Mandarin to Malawian students who have never encountered tonal languages or non-Latin scripts. No document discusses what happens to Mandarin programs once Chinese funding dries up. No document asks whether Malawian students might benefit more from learning technical skills than a foreign language. These silences are analytically important.

4. Comparative Language Policy Context

To understand the significance of Mandarin mandates, it helps to compare the status of Mandarin with other languages in Malawian universities.

Table 2: Language Status in Malawian Public Universities

Language	Status	Required for Graduation	Funding for Instruction
English	Official	Yes (implicitly)	Full (government)
Chichewa	National language	No	Minimal
Mandarin	Strategic	No	Significant
Other languages	Marginalized	No	None

The table reveals an inversion: a foreign language (Mandarin) receives significant external funding and institutional priority, while national languages (Chichewa, Chitumbuka, Chiyao) receive minimal support. This inversion reflects the power of educational diplomacy: China's willingness to fund language instruction shapes university priorities in ways that local language advocates cannot match.

Discussion

1. Asymmetrical Diplomacy and Soft Mandates

The findings show that Mandarin mandates in Malawian universities work mainly through soft mechanisms rather than formal requirements. This matches broader patterns in China-Africa educational diplomacy, where formal compulsion is rare but structural pressure is common (Gonzalez, 2020). However, the Malawian case reveals a specific dynamic: the absence of formal mandates coexists with significant soft mandates, and this coexistence may actually serve Chinese diplomatic interests by making mandates look voluntary while ensuring they are effective.

Drawing on Bacchi (2009), the problem represented in official documents is "lack of access to Chinese opportunities." The solution is Mandarin instruction. But this representation silences an alternative problem: "unequal power relations in which Malawian students must learn Chinese to access resources that should be available without language conditions." If this alternative problem were recognized, the solution might be renegotiating scholarship terms, not expanding Mandarin courses.

2. Pedagogical Concerns and Sustainability

The soft mandate mechanisms raise serious pedagogical questions. Mandarin is a tonal language with a logographic writing system fundamentally different from both English and Chichewa, which use Latin scripts (Han, 2017). Effective instruction requires trained teachers, appropriate materials, and consistent practice. In Malawi, most Mandarin instructors are Chinese nationals on short-term contracts (typically two years). This leads to high turnover, limited local pedagogical knowledge, and dependence on continued Chinese funding.

Moreover, soft mandates may produce students who enroll in Mandarin for instrumental reasons (scholarships, jobs) rather than genuine interest. Research in educational psychology suggests that extrinsic motivation leads to lower learning outcomes and higher dropout rates than intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The absence of completion data in Confucius Institute reports may hide this problem.

Sustainability is another concern. What happens to Malawian universities' Mandarin capacity if China reduces its educational funding? Unlike English , which is sustained by Malawi's colonial history, postcolonial governance structures, and global integration — Mandarin has no local base. The current infrastructure of Chinese instructors, China-funded labs, and Confucius Institute administration could disappear relatively quickly, leaving behind empty classrooms and dashed expectations.

3. Agency, Resistance, and the Limits of Soft Power

The findings also reveal spaces where Malawians exercise agency and resistance. The absence of formal graduation requirements is itself an act of institutional resistance. Unlike some other African countries where Mandarin has been integrated into core curricula, Malawian universities have kept it elective. This suggests that educational diplomacy has limits: China can fund and promote, but it cannot easily force curriculum changes on sovereign institutions.

Student resistance documented in the critical editorial cited earlier shows that not all Malawian students accept soft mandates uncritically. The editorial's demand for Chichewa instruction alongside Mandarin is a form of counter-narrative that challenges the hierarchy of languages. Future research should explore whether such resistance is widespread or isolated.

However, the concept of "resistance" needs nuance. Students who enroll in Mandarin to access scholarships are not simply passive victims of Chinese soft power; they are strategic actors navigating structural constraints. Their "choice" is constrained but still involves agency. The analytical task is to understand how agency operates within unequal structures not to

declare either complete domination or complete freedom.

4. Comparative Perspectives: Malawi in Regional Context

How does Malawi compare to other African countries? In Kenya, Confucius Institutes have integrated Mandarin into technical and vocational programs, but student protests have occurred when pressure to enroll increased (King, 2013). In Rwanda, Mandarin is promoted through bilateral agreements, but the government keeps control over the curriculum (Gonzalez, 2020). In South Africa, the presence of a large Chinese diaspora community creates different dynamics, including heritage learners and community-based language schools (Han, 2017).

Malawi differs from these cases in three ways. First, Malawi has a smaller Chinese diaspora and fewer direct economic ties, so Mandarin instruction depends more exclusively on diplomatic initiatives. Second, Malawi's language policy is less developed than South Africa's (which recognizes eleven official languages), so Mandarin enters a relatively unregulated linguistic landscape. Third, Malawi's extreme poverty and aid dependence over 40% of the national budget comes from donors may make it more vulnerable to soft mandate pressures than wealthier African nations. Future comparative research should examine these possibilities systematically.

5. Implications for Educational Sovereignty

This paper proposes the term diplomatically loaded language to describe Mandarin in Malawi: a language taught less for communicative need (few Malawians will ever speak Chinese outside formal contexts) and more for diplomatic signaling. Unlike colonial languages (English, French) that were imposed through conquest and administration, Mandarin arrives through partnership agreements and funding arrangements. But the effect may be similar: the privileging of an external language over local ones.

Educational sovereignty the right of a nation to determine its own educational priorities is at stake. When Chinese funding makes Mandarin instruction possible, and when scholarships require Chinese proficiency, Malawian universities face a difficult choice: accept the terms or forgo the resources. This is not coercion in the traditional sense, but it is also not free choice. The concept of soft mandates captures this ambiguity.

What would a decolonized language policy look like in Malawian higher education? At minimum, it would require parity of funding and status between foreign languages (Mandarin, English) and local languages (Chichewa, Chitumbuka, Chiyao). It would require transparency about the conditions attached to China-funded programs. And it would require that Malawian students have genuine choice not just formal choice, but substantive choice unconstrained by structural pressures. Achieving this is a political project, not merely a technical one.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are offered for policymakers, university administrators, and researchers.

1. For Malawian Universities

Recommendation 1: Conduct a comprehensive language policy audit. Universities should publicly disclose all language-related conditions in China-funded partnerships, including scholarship agreements, infrastructure grants, and Confucius Institute MOUs. Transparency is the first step toward informed decision-making.

Recommendation 2: Establish needs-based curriculum review. Before expanding Mandarin instruction, universities should conduct labor market surveys to find out what demand actually exists for Chinese language skills among employers. If demand is limited, resources might be better spent elsewhere.

Recommendation 3: Develop local language credits. Introduce Chichewa or other Malawian languages as optional credit courses to balance foreign language mandates. This would challenge the current hierarchy and affirm local linguistic heritage.

Recommendation 4: Invest in local teacher training. Build a pipeline of Malawian Mandarin instructors through exchange programs and degree pathways. Reducing dependence on Chinese national instructors would enhance sustainability and local ownership.

2. For Policymakers (Ministry of Education)

Recommendation 5: Negotiate language conditionality in bilateral agreements. The Ministry should formally raise the issue of scholarship language requirements in FOCAC and bilateral negotiations. Seeking exemptions or alternatives for Malawian students would reduce soft mandate pressure.

Recommendation 6: Develop a national language in education policy. Malawi currently lacks a comprehensive language policy for higher education. Such a policy should specify the status of foreign languages, the role of local languages,

and the conditions under which external funding can shape curriculum.

3. For Researchers

Recommendation 7: Conduct interview-based studies. This documentary study should be followed up with qualitative interviews of students, faculty, and administrators to understand the lived experiences of soft mandates.

Recommendation 8: Measure learning outcomes. Future research should assess actual Mandarin proficiency gains among students who enroll under soft mandate conditions, comparing them to students who enroll for intrinsic reasons.

Recommendation 9: Expand comparative scope. Comparative studies across multiple Malawian universities and with other African countries would identify contextual factors that shape how soft mandates work.

Conclusion

1. Summary of Findings

This paper critically analyzed the nature, mechanisms, and implications of Mandarin language mandates in Malawian university programs. The key findings are: (1) no formal graduation requirements exist at the three universities examined; (2) three soft mandate mechanisms operate effectively; scholarship conditionality, infrastructure diplomacy, and job market signaling; (3) these soft mandates reflect unequal diplomatic power between Malawi and China; (4) pedagogical concerns about sustainability and outcomes remain unaddressed; and (5) Malawian institutions and students have exercised limited but meaningful resistance.

2. Theoretical Contributions

The paper contributes to scholarship on China-Africa relations by introducing the concept of diplomatically loaded language and by showing how soft mandates operate in an understudied context. It also contributes to language policy studies by applying Bacchi's WPR framework to an African higher education setting.

3. Limitations Revisited

These findings must be interpreted in light of the study's limitations: documentary-only data, limited institutional access, and exclusion of private universities. The conclusions are exploratory and provisional, pending further empirical research.

4. Final Reflection

The case of Mandarin in Malawian universities illuminates a broader tension in African higher education: the tension between the need to engage with global powers and the need to preserve local educational sovereignty. There is nothing inherently wrong with teaching Chinese in Africa; language learning can be enriching and empowering. The problem arises when language instruction becomes a vehicle for diplomatic interests rather than educational ones, when foreign funding shapes curriculum priorities, and when students face pressure disguised as choice.

As one Malawian student put it in the editorial cited earlier: "We are not against learning Chinese. We are against being forced to choose between Chinese and nothing" (The Poly Post, 2022, p. 3). That sentiment captures the heart of the matter. Educational diplomacy should serve students, not the other way around. Whether China-Africa partnerships can achieve that remains an open question.

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