

# Chinese Bridge: Strategies to Improve the Competitiveness of the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University

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## Abstract

China entered the 21st century as a major power. Its new status is the major reason for the exponential increase in the number of foreigners learning Chinese, its only official language. To meet the demand for the language, it has initiated different programs. One such program is Chinese Bridge (汉语桥), a yearly language proficiency competition organized by CLEC—the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (formerly Hanban)—for non-native speakers of the Chinese language. This competition, all of which finals have been held in China since its inception, is now the premier showcase for the Confucius Institutes from different countries. Since its maiden outing in the senior category of the competition 8 years ago, the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University (hereafter referred to as “CI at NAU” or “the Institute”) has represented Nigeria 10 times in the finals. (The corollary is that the Institute has won the national championship 9 times), produced 3 continental (African) champions, won the “First Prize” award twice and the “Third Prize” award 4 times. Three of its alumni emerged as world champions during their studies in China. It has also narrowly missed the opportunity to compete in the grand final of the competition twice, owing to internet glitch. Using SWOT, this paper evaluates the Institute’s experience in the competition, suggesting ways the Institute can enhance its competitiveness in future.

## Keywords

Chinese Bridge, CI at NAU, CLEC, SWOT, Competitiveness

## 1. Introduction

Chinese Bridge, formally known as Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign Students, is “an annual international competition in which non-Chinese students demonstrate their comprehensive ability to use the Chinese language and their knowledge of Chinese culture” (Xinhua, 2023). For China, it is a platform for showcasing its accomplishments in promoting its own language globally and building cultural bridges between it and other nations (Sun, 2023) as well as “a bridge connecting the hearts and minds of youth around the world with Chinese youth” (BLCU, n.d.). Strictly speaking, foreign students are individuals studying in countries other than their own. Vis-à-vis this competition, they are those born and raised outside China with a first language that is not Chinese. The competition commenced in 2002—2 years prior to the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in Seoul. Its component parts are language competency, knowledge of China, Chinese cultural skills and comprehensive aptitude (BLCU, n.d.). It has become the most prestigious showcase for foreigners learning the Chinese language.

The Chinese language is being learned by millions around the world. There should be little or even no wondering for the gust of enthusiasm. After all, the language has the highest number of native speakers. It is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations as well as the language of the world’s second-largest economy. According to Zuo (2021), it has been incorporated into the national educational systems of over 70 countries.

People, even those learning the same language, face different challenges when they learn languages. According to Ellis (1985), learners of the same language vary in many ways when learning the same language. With different backgrounds, motivations, personalities, learners of the same language face different challenges and adopt different strategies to deal with the challenges (Huang, 2000).

Chinese-language learners at CI at NAU face various challenges. Firstly, there is the challenge posed by “prior languages”. In this paper, “prior languages” are those various languages the students already speak before their study of the Chinese language. Majority of the students learn Chinese as their second additional language: they already speak their respective mother tongues as well as English, their country’s official language. Some even speak the Nigerian pidgin, additionally. This challenge is less tolerable for those whose mother tongues are not tonal. It has been observed that learners from those ethnic groups whose languages, like the Chinese language, are tonal tend to outperform those whose languages do not have tone marks. The second challenge is that the Chinese language does not have an alphabet. Without prior acquaintance with Chinese, many entry-level students are bound to spend fairly long periods acquainting themselves with CAL (Chinese as an additional language). The third challenge is that many students are combining their degree studies with HSK. The competing demands on their time retards the speed at which they progress in their

study by depriving them of ample time to practice what they have learnt.

The national championship of the competition is organized by the Chinese Embassy but sponsored by Chinese enterprises in Nigeria. The sponsors donate the prizes—usually laptops and other learning equipment. The Institute usually rewards its contestants with cash prizes but it does not yet enjoy any form of corporate sponsorship of its participation in the competition.

CI at NAU first participated in Chinese Bridge in 2015. It missed the 2016 edition but rejoined in 2017. Between 2018 and 2023, it produced 3 world champions and 3 continental (African) champions. It also won two “First Prize” and 4 “Third Prize” awards. There is no doubt at all that the institute has distinguished itself in the competition. Believing that it has potential for greater achievements, we decided to use the SWOT framework to analyse its strengths and weaknesses. We found that the major strength of the institute is that its students not only have a prodigious talent for learning Mandarin but also leverage the availability of dedicated, goal-oriented and experienced Chinese lecturers at the institute. On the debit side, we found its main weakness to be that its entrants generally have only learnt Chinese for less than 96 weeks (two years) at the time of their participation in the competition. The major threat is that the students are generally disinclined to participate in the competition. In light of these three findings, we are suggesting the following five strategies: 1) select participants from freshmen in the host university’s department of Chinese Studies rather than from the Institute’s HSK students; 2) increase awareness of the benefits of participating in the competition 3) motivate participants with financial incentives; 4) devise means to bolster self-confidence in participants; 5) create ambient inclusiveness for the competition.

## 2. A Glance at Chinese Bridge

There is a correlation between a country’s international standing and the degree of interest by foreigners in its language, culture, history, foreign policy, etc. Thus, for example, the enviable status of the English language is arguably because of the combined status of Britain and the United States in the international schemes of things. According to Phillipson (2000), “[F]rom a minor language in 1600, English has in less than four centuries come to be the leading language of international communication in the world today. This remarkable development is ultimately the result of 17th, 18th, and 19th-century British successes in conquest, civilization, and trade, but it was enormously accelerated by the emergence of the United States as the major military world power and technological leader in the aftermath of World War II.”

Great powers employ various means to promote their languages under what Phillipson (2000) described as linguistic imperialism. For example, each of the major Western powers has a language-cum-culture institute—Alliance Française, the British Council, Instituto Cervantes, the Goethe Institute, Instituto Camões and the American Spaces. Following in these Western powers’ footsteps,

China established the first Confucius Institute in 2004. The Confucius Institutes have now become the flagship of the efforts by China to meet the increasing interest in its language and culture overseas.

Once a country becomes powerful, the number of foreigners desiring to learn its language and culture is bound to increase; so it is small wonder that the number of foreigners learning the Chinese language following China's emergence as a world power has been on the rise. To foster interest in the learning of its language among foreigners as well as help them better appreciate Chinese culture, CLEC launched the Chinese Bridge (hanyu qiao, 汉语桥). The maiden edition of the competition, described by Tang (2011) as "the most influential Chinese proficiency competition for foreign students," was held in Shandong Province in 2002. The 2020, 2021 and 2022 editions were held online, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a platform for Chinese language learners from around the world to showcase proficiency, share learning experiences, evaluate achievements and strike up friendship across national, racial and cultural borders. Essentially a project to promote international friendship, it has been veritably described by Xinhua (2022) as "Bridge of Language, Bridge of Culture, Bridge of Friendship and Bridge of Soul". Its four categories are the Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign College (University) Students incepted in 2002, the Chinese Proficiency Competition for Secondary School Students established in 2008, the Chinese Proficiency Competition for Primary School Students launched in 2020 and, lastly, the Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign Students in China started in 2016. (The last category is for foreigners studying in Chinese universities). Our present research focuses on the first two categories.

The number of foreigners learning Chinese has steadily increased during the past two decades, arguably because of China's emergence as a world power. In order to foster interest in learning Chinese among foreigners as well as help them better appreciate Chinese language and culture, CLEC (formerly Hanban before 2020) initiated Chinese Bridge (hanyu qiao, 汉语桥). This competition, organized by CLEC, has become a prestigious language fiesta. The 2020, 2021 and 2022 editions were held online, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a platform for Chinese language learners from around the world to showcase proficiency, share learning experiences, evaluate achievements and strike friendship across national, racial and cultural borders. CI at NAU has so far not participated in the Primary School category; and those who have emerged as world champions during their studies in China—Harford Michael Kenechukwu in 2018, Ojimmadu Raphael Ebube in 2023 and Divine Chidera Azubuike in 2023)—are alumni.

Chinese Bridge is two-staged: national and international. The Chinese embassies or the Confucius Institutes organize the first stage to select national representatives at the finals held in China. (National champions receive full-sponsored flight to the finals in China). The finals are organized by CLEC

(in conjunction with China Global Television Network) and broadcast globally on the TV, hence the huge publicity and media exposure it enjoys worldwide.

Winners of the university students' category are invited to China for the finals. They are accompanied by the first runners-up as observers. In contrast, both the winners and the first runners-up of the secondary school students' category enter the finals on a basis of coequality.

Generally, contestants are tested in these four areas of knowledge (*Chinese Bridge, 2022a*): Language proficiency (which assesses competency in listening, speaking, reading and writing); general knowledge about Chinese geography, history, economy and culture; cultural talent show that involves Chinese songs, dances, musical instruments, calligraphy, paintings, martial arts; and comprehensive learning abilities that assess the appropriacy of the contestants' training in Chinese language and culture. The national championship assesses the first three areas; the finals assess all four areas, which are more riveting, dramatic and exciting (*Chinese Bridge, 2022b*).

The national championship involves three rounds. The first round tests contestants' language proficiency. Contestants make a 5-minute speech that includes a brief self-introduction. Those in the college (university) category speak on the theme, "One World, One Family" (天下一家), while their counterparts in the secondary school category speak on the theme, "Fly High with Chinese" (不负韶华). The second round tests contestants' knowledge of China's geography, economy, history and culture. The third round is relevant to Chinese cultural talent, requiring contestants to put up a brief entertainment with fun-filled performance of Chinese songs, drama skit, Chinese operas, ethnic/folk dance, playing of Chinese musical instruments, operatic art, calligraphy, paper cutting, painting, kungfu, t'ai chi, acrobatics, art and craft skills, etc.

The finals of the competition held in China consist of two rounds: the semis and the finale. National champions from more than 100 countries, divided into 5 parallel groups (according to the five continents—Africa, Europe, Asia, America and the Oceania), vie in the semis. The semis consist of four rounds, because all contestants from the same continent compete against one another for the continental top 10, the continental top 6, the continental top 2 and the continental ultimate champion. By process of elimination, winners of these rounds constitute the "Global Top 50", then the "Global Top 30", then the "Global Top 10", then the "Global Top 5". Finally, the five continental champions (the "Global Top 5") will compete for the "Global Champion" in the grand finale.

Each of the 'Global Top 50' contestants receives a Confucius Institute scholarship. The awards they compete for are: One "Global Champion", five "Continental Champion", five "First Prize", five "Second Prize", 15 "Third Prize", 15 individual prizes (such as the "Best Eloquence", awarded for oratorical prowess); "Best Talent" (awarded for talent show) and 4 "Excellent Prize". Most of these prizes are merely consolatory.

The world champion receives two titles, namely "Chinese Language Ambas-

sador” and “Chinese Language Star”, as well as a full scholarship tagged with an annual round-trip flight ticket. The five continental champions and the five “First Prize” winners each receive “Chinese Language Ambassador” title and a full scholarship tagged with an annual round-trip flight ticket. The five “Second Prize” winners are awarded a one-year scholarship tagged with a round-trip flight ticket. The 15 “Third Prize” winners and 15 - 18 individual prizes each receives a scholarship for one academic semester in China, plus a round-trip flight ticket as well. The four “Excellent Prize” awardees each receives a scholarship for one academic semester in China with a round-trip flight ticket.

Chinese Bridge, which mimics Britain’s English Olympics, arouses tremendous interest in learning Chinese among students in different countries. By fostering the understanding and appreciation of Chinese language and culture, it builds a communication bridge between young people from China and the other countries. Since its inception 13 years ago, more than 1.5 million young people from more than 160 countries have participated in the national championships and more than 7,000 have participated in the finals in China (CLEC, 2023a). A large-scale international competition organized by CLEC, it has become a popular international fiesta for Chinese language learners worldwide. It is small wonder that it has been described as “the Olympic Games for Chinese language learning” (CLEC, 2023b).

### 3. Major Achievements of CI at NAU

Chinese Bridge started in 2002. The first Confucius Institute in Africa was established in 2005 at the University of Nairobi (Xinhua, 2005). The two Confucius Institutes in Nigeria were established in the same year—CI at NAU in March 2008 and the Confucius Institute at University of Lagos (hereafter referred to as CI at Unilag) in October 2008. The former opened in February 2009, the latter in May 2009. The latter joined Chinese Bridge in 2014, the latter in 2015. Chekwube Anthony Uyanwune (齐笑天) from the former (then headed by Ji Nengwen) represented Nigeria in the 2015 finals. He was the first student from that Institute to participate in a competition held in China. (By the way, Uyanwune now owns a flourishing private business in Lagos). The Institute called off its trip to Lagos for the 2016 edition, owing to a protest against a 6-month power outage in Awka, which blocked off the Enugu-Onitsha expressway (Ujumadu, 2016). Harford Michael Kenechuwu (韩懋宇) (a third-year student of the department of Religion and Human Relations, NAU, and who had studied Chinese for only 72 weeks) was the first runner-up in the 16th edition of the university students’ category hosted by the latter in 2017. He accompanied the national champion from the latter to the finals but as an observer. Later in the same year, he received a Confucius Institute scholarship to study for a Master’s in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (MTC SOL) at the College of Chinese Language and Culture, Nankai University (one of the top universities in China).

He parlayed his experience from participating in the 2017 edition to become winner of the 2018 Chinese Bridge Competition for Foreign Students in China (which is for foreigners attending educational institutions in China). That feat earned him an invitation to the 13th Global Confucius Institute Conference in Chengdu, which he attended as an observer (Nankai University, 2018). During his doctoral studies, he featured in a documentary titled “China’s Poverty Alleviation Story,” organized by the Chinese Language Club in 2020 (Tao, 2021).

In 2018 CI at NAU hosted the national championship of the 17th Chinese Bridge for College Students. It cleared all top 5 prizes in that championship. The champion, Ekwensi Anthony Ebuka (丁家明) (a third-year student from the Department of Educational Management and Policy of NAU, and who had studied Chinese for only 64 weeks at the time of the event) represented the country in the finals. He won “African Champion” in the finals, thereby becoming the first Nigerian to win such an award (CI at NAU, 2018). He received the “Chinese Language Ambassador” award as well as a full Confucius Institute scholarship to study for a master’s degree at Nanjing Normal University.

In the 17th Chinese Bridge for College Students and the 12th Chinese Bridge for the Secondary School Students hosted by CI at Unilag in 2019, CI at NAU’s Nweke Chioma Precious (赵馨兰) came second in the former category, while Samuel Miracle (顾思源) (a 16-year-old student of Unizik High School who had studied Chinese for only 68 weeks at the time of the event) came first in the latter category. That year was the first time the CI at NAU would be taking part in the junior category. In addition to an invitation to attend the finals as an observer, Nweke received a scholarship (which she activated in 2023) to study for a Bachelor’s in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (BTCSOL) at the Communication University of China, Beijing (Nweke, 2020). Samuel proceeded to become the African champion in his category (CI at NAU, 2019). He thus became the second contestant from Nigeria to become a continental champion in the competition. He received the “Chinese Language Ambassador” award as well as a full scholarship to study for a BTCSOL at Shanghai International Studies University.

The competition was held online for three years (2020-2022) during the COVID-19 pandemic. CI at NAU represented Nigeria in the both categories of the 2020 and 2021 finals. 20-year-old Ojimmadu Raphael Ebube (李昊瑞) (Nigeria’s representative in the 19th edition of the senior category held in 2020), who had studied Chinese for 78 weeks, came second among African participants and made the “Global Top 8”. He also won these three prizes—“First Prize”, “Chinese Language Ambassador”, the “Most Popular Contestant” (CLEC, 2020a). He was the first participant who could not attend the competition in China. He received a scholarship to study for a BTCSOL at Shanghai International Studies University. As was noted in the foregoing, in 2022 he joined CI at NAU alumni who have become world champions of the competition for foreigners studying in Chinese universities.

In 2020, 18-year-old Azubuike Divine Chidera (王成功), who had studied Chinese for 72 weeks (physical 20 weeks; online 52 weeks), made the “Global Top 20” in the 13th Chinese Bridge for the Secondary School Students (CLEC, 2020b). He also won the “Third Prize” and received a scholarship to study for a BTCSOL at Shanghai International Studies University. In 2023 he became the fifth alumnus to win the world championship for foreigners studying in Chinese universities.

In the 20th edition of the senior category held in 2021, Michael Praise Chinerem (何书仪)—a third-year student of the department of Chinese Studies, NAU, who had studied Chinese for 72 weeks (physical 20 weeks; online 52 weeks)—made “Top 28”, in addition to winning “Third Prize” and “Excellent Internet Popularity Award” (CLEC, 2021a). She is currently studying for a MTCSOL at Xiamen University.

In the 14th edition of the junior category also held in 2021, Ogbonna Oluchi Emmanuella (李佳蔚), at the time in her 70th week of studying Chinese (35 weeks each for physical and online), made “Top 9”, came second among African participants, as well as won these three prizes—“First Prize”, “Chinese Language Ambassador”, and “Most Popular Contestant” (CLEC, 2021b). She is currently doing a BTCSOL at Shanghai International Studies University.

In the 15th edition of the junior category held in 2022, 17-year-old Okorie Nelson Somuadina (张帅哲), who was in his 72nd week of studying Chinese at the time (12 weeks online and 50 weeks physical), made “Top 21”, in addition to winning the third place. He was also voted “Most Popular Contestant” (number one in the world) in the online poll (CLEC, 2022). He is currently pursuing a BTCSOL at Xiamen University.

In the 22nd Chinese Bridge for Foreign College Students in 2023, 20-year-old Okechukwu Chioma Lovinah (苏瑾玥), who was in her 60th week of studying Chinese at the time, made “Top 20”, in addition to winning the third place. She was also voted “Most Popular Contestant” (number one in the world) in the online poll (CLEC, 2023b). She was the first to travel to China to participate in the competition after the COVID-19 epidemic.

19-year-old Okechukwu Chioma Lovinah (安姝瑶), the continental champion as well as “Top 3” winner in the 16th edition of the secondary school students’ category held in 2013, studied Chinese for 50 weeks and was doing HSK 3 when she became the first basic-level student in the Confucius Institute’s history to participate in a global competition. She did not only have the shortest duration of studying at CI at NAU, she also had the shortest study duration among all the participants in that edition of the competition. She is the third continental champion in the college students’ category as well as the second in the secondary school students’ category. She won the “Chinese Language Ambassador” award which came with a bachelor scholarship and a round-trip ticket.

In summary, since October 2018 CI at NAU has won 4 global “Third Prizes,” 2 global “First Prizes,” produced 3 continental champions as well as 2 two world

champions among foreigners studying in Chinese universities. The world champions had formerly been Chinese Bridge contestants who became world champions during their first 6 months of studying in China. These accomplishments, alongside recognition of the alumni, have significantly enhanced the international profile of both the Confucius Institute and its host university.

#### **4. SWOT Analysis of CI at NAU in Chinese Bridge**

We here use the SWOT framework to evaluate the experience of CI at NAU in Chinese Bridge, with a view to using our findings to improve the Institute's competitiveness in the future.

##### **4.1. Strength: Ability to Master Mandarin in a Short Time**

The Chinese language is generally considered to be one of the most difficult languages in the world to master. One of the inherent difficulties is that the language is tonal, with the meaning of words determined by how they are pronounced according to its four tone marks. Believably, tonality causes the most difficulty for pitch-accent language speakers. The three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria are Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. Since the languages of all three predominant ethnic groups are tonal, many Nigerians learning Chinese, like native speakers of those Asian languages that are tonal, too, such as Thai, Thai, Vietnamese and Lao, can easily leverage this shared attribute in learning Chinese.

Another element that makes the Chinese language difficult to learn is the writing system. Chinese, unlike English and French, for example, does not have any alphabet or Romanized lettering system. Instead, it is pictorial and ideographic, relying on strokes and radicals to construct individual characters (words). Mandarin learners overcome this challenge by memorizing the characters and practicing how to write them after another and repeatedly on blank papers until they have been lodged firmly in the mind. Chinese character learning, therefore, requires much memorizing and muscular exertion/motor activity. For each character, Mandarin learners need to do these three things, namely learn the stroke sequence; internalize the meaning; master the pronunciation. memorize the meaning as well as master the pronunciation. The corollary of this is that mastery of Mandarin needs considerable investment of time and concentration. Fortunately, CI at NAU has students who are so eager to learn the Chinese language that they will not only sacrifice weekends and breaks but will also stay behind during strikes. In addition, the students are leveraging the fact that most Nigerian languages are tonal. CI at NAU is located in the southeast of Nigeria, where the predominant ethnic group is Igbo. In general, Nigerian students can attain the intermediate level within forty-four weeks and the advanced level within seventy-two weeks. In contrast, native speakers of English will need about 88 weeks to become appreciably communicative (Tutormandarin, 2018). This ability to master Mandarin in a short space of time largely accounts for our stu-

dents' outstanding performance in Chinese Bridge.

#### **4.2. Weakness: Short Duration of Study**

As noted earlier, about 150 continental champions from more than 100 countries have attended the finals every year. Champions from developed countries had studied Mandarin for 2 - 5 years. Additionally, most of them had cultural experience garnered from briefly staying in China, for example for 2 weeks of Chinese Summer Camp or studying in China for one semester or one year. Some had even lived in China for a time before starting to learn the Chinese language. As is evident in the foregoing, Chinese Bridge tests not only proficiency in the Chinese language but also general knowledge about China—the geography, history, economy, culture, etc. So contestants with Chinese cultural experience garnered from visiting or residing in China will always have a head start in the competition.

By contrast, 9 contestants from CI at NAU who had won awards in the final had only learned Mandarin for an average of 67.3 weeks, for a minimum of 50 weeks to a maximum of 78 weeks. All of them had little acquaintance with China; and none had been to China prior to their participation in the competition. Due to the prevailing economic conditions in their country, most students cannot travel to China as holidaymakers or self-sponsored students. In fact, many students from the department of Chinese Studies have had to give up the opportunity afforded by the “3 + 1” immersion programme whereby the students of the department should spend their third year of study in Chinese universities, because they could not afford the flight tickets.

Although our students can achieve proficiency in Mandarin in relatively short space of time, they will need fairly long time to acceptably familiarise themselves with China. Sound knowledge of China's geography, history, economy and culture needs time to accumulate. Thus the longer their exposure to general knowledge of China, the better for them. Such knowledge needs first-hand experience of Chinese culture in China. It is never enough to learn about a country from only what you have read or heard about it. First-hand experience is a *sine qua non*. After all, according to St. Augustine, “The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.”

#### **4.3. Opportunity: Availability of Resourceful Teachers**

Two factors account for the impressive performance of CI at NAU in Chinese Bridge. The first is the complementary valence of dedicated, resourceful Chinese teachers and self-motivated, studious students. The two parties complement each other thus—the students provide the zeal; the teachers harness the zeal. The Chinese teachers teach contestants about China, enhance their presentations with graphics and moderate their gesture and gesticulations. Furthermore, they select suitable cultural talent activities and then coach them in those shows. So, if the contestants are actors visible on the stage, the teachers are artistic directors

directing their performances from behind the scenes.

To bolster their competitiveness, contestants must not only be invested with wide-ranging knowledge about China, they must also be acquainted with Chinese cultural talent shows, such as Chinese songs, dances, musical instruments, calligraphy, paintings and the martial arts. Preparing contestants, without doubt, comes with a workload far heavier than obtains in normal classroom teaching. In fact, it obliges the teachers to exceed the workload specified in their contract with CLEC (their employers).

CI at NAU boasts a team of Chinese teachers who pine for extraordinary achievements by their students. Those teachers will spare nothing just to see their students excel in their passions and endeavors—in both studies and extra-curricular activities. Thus they are not loath to forgo their break time, weekends and holidays. The spirit of volunteerism among them is a phenomenon that is rarely found at the other CIs in Africa. In fact, the norm at the CIs around the world is that the Chinese teachers stick by the workload stipulated in their contract with CLEC and enjoy themselves outside office hours. They will not hesitate to fight off any attempt to encroach upon their personal time.

Besides being altruistic, versatile and multi-talented, the Chinese teachers must be vastly experienced about Chinese Bridge to be able to effectively coach contestants. It has been observed that fresh Chinese graduates find the prospect of working abroad as lectors irresistibly exciting and attractive, since it affords them the opportunity to experience other cultures and to enhance their own CVs. Rich CVs come in handy when they want to start a new job related. After all, most of them will become less peripatetic and footloose and fancy free after marriage. This is the reason why most Chinese teachers at the CIs are fresh-faced, single men and women in their twenties. Chinese teachers are generally young, fresh graduates, whose experience in teaching Chinese is limited to their internship; and only a few of them have any previous experience in coaching for the competition.

35 Chinese teachers have worked at CI at NAU since its inception in 2008. 31 of them were single when they worked there. 28 were working for the first time after graduation from the university. None had previous experience in preparing contestants for Chinese Bridge. Obviously, it is the ability to learn on the job and garner experience that has produced the Chinese Bridge coaches we have at CI at NAU. A minimum of 36 months (that is 3 years) is required for a Chinese teacher to become a qualified Chinese Bridge coach. New teachers spend their first year teaching, trying to understand the intricacies of their new job and acclimatizing to the new environment. During the second year, they are groomed for participation in preparing students for the competition by shadowing their senior Chinese Bridge coaches. This progression enables them to evolve into full-fledged, independent coaches by the third year. If most of them should complete their stint within 2 years and return to China without extending it, the Institute can easily find their replacements. The Institute is fortunate in having

abundance of teachers vastly experienced in preparing students for the competition. This is one of its advantages compared with the other Institutes. Because Chinese teachers with a disposition to work long-term at the Institute do not only morph into qualified coaches of the competition, but they also, by identifying and nurturing potentials, are able to forge strong bonds with their students. The teachers, therefore, can formulate learning plans that address the peculiar talents of the students, which are intended to help them prepare for competitions and other activities.

As mentioned earlier, a total of 35 Chinese teachers have worked at CI at NAU. Only 3 of the number worked for only one year and, therefore, did not complete their 2-year stint, because of ill-health. The average stint duration for all the teachers is 46 months (nearly 4 years). 31 teachers (88.5%) worked more than 3 years. The majority of teachers have worked more than 3 years. This is the major reason for the availability of experienced Chinese teachers involved in preparing Chinese Bridge contestants at the Institute, which is situated in a place where the living conditions, as well as security, are far below the acceptable standards.

#### 4.4. Threat: Apathy

One of the factors constraining CI at NAU's participation in Chinese Bridge is that the vast majority of the students are unwilling to participate in the competition. The average annual student intake at the Institute since 2018 is 3500. About 1200 of the number can pass HSK 4 (intermediate level) each year; and about 150 can pass HSK 5 and 6 (advanced levels). Yet, less than 10 (that is 0.7%) of the combined number (1350) have agreed to participate in the competition every year. Efforts to include the *crème de la crème* from these two advanced levels have always been constrained by their refusal to participate in the competition. The are two major reasons for the unvarying disposition to opt out.

Firstly, proficiency in Mandarin is currently a super seller in Nigeria's labour market. The employability rate of those who have attained the intermediate level (HSK 4) is almost 100%; and their average monthly earning is 3 - 6 times higher than that of those who do not know Mandarin; and those who have attained the advanced levels (HSK5-6) can earn 10 - 15 times the income of those who do not know the language. As previously mentioned, Nigerian students can attain the intermediate level after 44 weeks of Chinese language study. The seller's market created by the increasing demand for Nigerians with proficiency in Mandarin induces more than 90% of those who have finished HSK 4 to discontinue their language study in order to find some well-paid jobs. Only 10% progress to the advanced levels (HSK5-6). Such ones want to study in China or are combining the HSK programme with their degree studies, the latter of which they do not want to abandon. To illustrate with an example, in 2013 there was not even one single student among the Institute's 800 students with an intermediate or advanced HSK to enter for the competition in both junior and senior categories,

because such students had all left the Institute for work. It was the worst experience of the Institute since its inception. As a result, the Chinese teachers had no choice but to cajole entry-level students into participating. It has been mentioned previously that there are only two Confucius Institutes in Nigeria: one at NAU and another at Unilag. Each Institute usually enters 8 - 10 participants in the national championship in both categories. However, despite its best efforts, CI at NAU was only able to find 2 candidates for the junior category and 3 candidates for the senior category. As mentioned previously, both Okechukwu Chioma Lovinah (the world's "Third Prize" winner in the senior category) and Jacob Omotola Angel (the continental champion in the junior category) were the entry-level students (HSK 3 students); and they were the first entry-level students of the Institute to participate in a global competition.

The other factor is psychological. Mental endurance among our students tends to be weak when they are subjected to pressure. Even those contestants who are communicative and self-assured in familiar, relaxed atmospheres can become nervous and disconcerted with the result that some will quit the competition. To illustrate, Igwe Chima Victor (who took part in the 16th edition of the junior category held in 2017) suddenly became so nervous on the stage that he had to quit the competition prematurely. Another example is Agbo Victoria Ene (安然), the national champion of the 20th edition of the senior category held in 2021. She was the first champion from the Confucius Classroom (CC) at the Federal Polytechnic, Oko (one of the affiliated centres of CI at NAU). To the utter consternation of everybody, before preparations for the finals could begin she requested to withdraw, citing psychological pressure, extreme nervousness and feeling of inadequate readiness. Her fourth excuse was the need to find a job, so she could support her family out of deference to her mother. Despite her coach's repeated efforts to comfort and encourage her, she ultimately gave up. Consequently, in the 2021 global Competition of Chinese Bridge, Nigeria first runner-up in the national championship, Michael Praise Chinecherem from the Chinese Studies department of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, took place the national champion to attend the final contest. She shocked everyone with her decision to terminate her participation because of nervousness. She was so promising that the Committee of Chinese Bridge Organization (the umpires) believed that she would go far in the competition, with good chance of becoming another continental (African) champion from the Institute. That edition was held online because of the COVID-19 epidemic. The internet had broken down during the course of the competition; and when it was restored, she had become so nervous and dejected that she could not continue in the competition. Yet, she made the "Top 28" in the world.

The third example is Okorie Nelson Somuadina (first runner-up in the 15th edition of the junior category held in 2022). So good was he that the umpires adjudged him to be on course to emerge the continental (African) or even the world champion. However, to the utter consternation of his huge fan base, his

progress was halted by poor network that left him dazed, disconcerted and unable to continue. He, nonetheless, ended up among the “Top 21”.

## 5. Strategies to Overcome Challenges

Based on the above SWOT analysis, we believe that by leveraging our identified strengths and overcoming our weaknesses in the following four areas, we can better cultivate our entrants and further enhance our competitiveness in the Chinese Bridge competition:

### 5.1. Choose Contestants from Freshmen of the Host University’s Department of Chinese Studies

The Mandarin proficiency level of most students of the Institute can reach the intermediate level after only one year of study and advanced level after only two years. Although the students can easily attain these levels of language proficiency, the short duration of time they spend learning Chinese severely limits their general knowledge of Chinese history, economy, culture, etc.

CI at NAU is a not-for-profit organization that collaborates with its host university to provide Chinese language training, with a strong bias for HSK programme. Because the programme is open to the public, its student population is wide and varied comprising people from different parts of the country and backgrounds. After 1 - 2 years of study, most of them leave the Institute in order to find well-paid jobs with their knowledge of the language. Undoubtedly, the best way to stem the hemorrhage of talents is cooperating with the host university to discover, select and cultivate potential contestants from among the freshmen in the university’s department of Chinese Studies. Students of that department need a minimum of 4 years of continuous Chinese language study to graduate. Mentored by hardworking teachers, they can attain the intermediate levels during their first year and receive a scholarship to spend their third year in China, courtesy of the “3 + 1” immersion programme, which affords them the fantastic opportunity to experience the various aspects of China first-hand. The Institute normally selects the brightest students from the third and fourth years as potential Chinese Bridge contestants. Such students are likely to continue to study Chinese after returning to Nigeria.

### 5.2. Emphasize the Benefits of Participation

Motivation is either intrinsic or extrinsic. For most contestants, intrinsic motivation, the term that describes “the incentive we feel to complete a task simply because we find it interesting or enjoyable” (Falk, 2023), is not the overriding consideration for participating in the competition; rather, it is extrinsic motivation—“an external incentive to engage in a specific activity, especially motivation arising from the expectation of punishment or reward” (APA, 2024). Most students consider their participation in the competition as the shortest route to the realization of their dream of travelling to China for studies.

Mandarin learners are most likely to want to participate in Chinese Bridge if they are sufficiently convinced of the benefits of doing so. The benefits include the opportunity to hone their language skills, garner cultural experience and make friends with other Mandarin learners and native speakers alike. Of course, if they make the “Top 50” in the finals, they could receive the Confucius Institute scholarships some of which come with paid flight to China. (It is difficult for most students who receive the scholarships to buy their flight tickets). The Institute has produced a combined total of 9 national champions from the junior and senior categories of the competition since 2018. Those champions have represented Nigeria in China. It is a truly remarkable achievement that all of them made the ‘Top 30’ in the finals. Emphasising these tangible and intangible benefits can help in no small measure to motivate the students to participate in the competition.

### **5.3. Provide Financial Support**

As previously mentioned, Mandarin learners can easily find jobs that pay 3 - 15 times higher than what their peers who have not studied the language receive. In order to encourage the students to participate in Chinese Bridge, CI at NAU should provide financial support to compensate for the income those who agree to participate are bound to lose during the competition period. Such consideration is bound to reduce apathy and increase general willingness to participate in the competition.

### **5.4. Improve Mental Preparedness of Contestants**

Chinese Bridge is highly competitive, so it is little wonder that many contestants feel nervous about it. To help contestants overcome their nervousness, the Institute should organize activities that bear on the Chinese language and Chinese culture. Such activities can enhance contestants’ competitive experience and capacity to retain or regain composure, provide opportunities for contestants to practise their Chinese, enhance their understanding of Chinese culture, improve their language proficiency and help them better respond to inherent tension. The Institute can use different ways to help contestants gain confidence in themselves, for example, by organising counselling sessions, conducting psychological evaluation and providing orientation personalized to the needs of contestants.

### **5.5. Make Participation Worthwhile**

Interest in Chinese Bridge among students could be increased if they are convinced the competition is worth their while. This is why those alumni who have returned from studying in China, as well as past participants, are periodically invited to the Institute to give pep talks to, and share their experiences, with the students. This can arouse interest in students and increase their awareness of the competition. Interaction with such individuals will definitely help in curbing

apathy among the students. The second way to arouse interest in the competition is to tailor cultural activities and other events related to the competition to appeal to the aesthetic fancies of the Institute's highly mixed student population. Certificates of participation can be issued. Also, participants can be projected into the limelight through the sharing of the photos and videos of their performances on the Institute's website and on social media platforms, etc. Thirdly, the Institute can create online communities and forums where the students can interact with native speakers and other participants. Such platforms can conduce to effective preparations during the competition. This strategy can bolster interest in, and satisfaction with, the competition, motivating the students to continue learning Chinese and participating in the competition. Lastly, informative videos, podcasts, blogs, social media posts, newsletters, flyers, posters and other resources profiling the features and benefits of the competition as well as select testimonials and success stories of past participants should be created and circulated.

## 6. Conclusions

Chinese Bridge has arguably become the path through which the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University has become a household name among Confucius Institutes. With achievements in that competition, the Institute has enhanced not only its own global visibility but also that of its host—Nnamdi Azikiwe University. While the main strength of the Institute in the competition is the mutually supportive relationship between its dedicated Chinese tutors and their highly self-motivated students, the main weakness, and the main threat, is the reluctance of the students to prioritise the Institute's great expectations from participating in the competition. Students will rather quit their studies in order to find some well-paid jobs as interpreters, translators, salespersons, etc. than oblige entreaties from their teachers to participate in the competition. For CI at NAU, the benefits of participating in Chinese Bridge far outweigh the demands of identifying talents and grooming them for the competition.

In this paper, the authors aimed to evaluate the experience of the Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in the Chinese Bridge competition, suggesting ways the Institute can enhance its competitiveness in future. The challenge of apathy may not be peculiar to the Institute but to all others in developing countries where knowledge of the language is regarded, first and foremost, as a means to leverage the concomitant opportunities in the deepening ties between China and such countries. Such challenge may be absent in developed countries where the motive is self-improvement and not advancement in economic and social standings.

Since 2018, CI at NAU has participated in the Chinese Bridge and has produced 9 champions in the Nigerian championship. All of these champions have made it to the world's "Top 30" and have received awards in the finals held in China. 3 of the number have become African champions, 2 have won "First

Prizes”, and 4 have secured “Third Prizes” in the finals. Moreover, these participants are the fastest learners of Chinese in the annual competition. During their studies in China, 3 proceeded to become world champions. These achievements are, without doubt, truly remarkable feats and are held up as the most successful cases among Confucius Institutes in the world.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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