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# The History and Current Status of Chinese Language Teaching in Hungary: A Case Study of the Chinese Department and Confucius Institute at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE)

## Abstract

The field of Chinese studies is very well established in Hungary. With the advances in Chinese language teaching and the rapid development of relations between China and Hungary in recent years, the number of Chinese learners in Hungary has increased, and ‘Chinese fever’ continues to spread. This article reviews the history and the current situation of Chinese language teaching in university Chinese departments and Confucius Institutes in Hungary; conducts an in-depth analysis of Chinese language teaching institutions, focusing especially on the curriculum and teaching methods in Chinese departments; reveals existing problems; and proposes appropriate solutions.

**Keywords:** Chinese language teaching, curriculum setting, optimisation

叶秋月

## 匈牙利汉语教学的历史与现状： 以罗兰大学中文系和孔子学院为例

## 摘要

近年来，随着汉语教学的进步以及中匈关系的快速发展，匈牙利的汉语学习者数量逐渐增加，“汉语热”持续蔓延。本文回顾了匈牙利大学中文系和孔子学院的汉语教学历史与现状；深入分析了汉语教学机

构，特别是中文系的课程设置与教学方法；揭示了现存的问题，并提出了相应的解决方案。

**关键词：**汉语教学，课程设置，优化

## Introduction

Chinese language teaching in Hungary began in the 1950s. By the 1980s and 1990s, with the rise of China's economy and an influx of Chinese immigrants, Hungary experienced a surge of interest in learning Chinese. Entering the 21st century, with deeper trade and cultural exchanges between China and Hungary, and the active promotion of both governments, Chinese language learning in Hungary further developed.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and on 6 June 2015, Hungary signed a memorandum of understanding with China on BRI cooperation, becoming the first European country to officially join the initiative. Hungary expressed a strong willingness to participate in areas such as infrastructure, production capacity, and trade under the BRI framework.<sup>2</sup> While China is accelerating its 'westward opening' under the BRI, Hungary follows an 'eastward opening' policy, positioning itself as a key partner for China. The BRI and the deepening cooperation between China and Hungary triggered yet another wave of interest in learning Chinese in Hungary. Additionally, the Hungarian National Debt Immigration Programme, which ran from 18 April 2013 to 31 March 2017, attracted thousands of Chinese families to settle in Hungary, mainly in its capital, Budapest. The arrival of these new immigrants further fuelled enthusiasm for learning Chinese.

Chinese language education in Hungary started with Sinology programmes in higher education institutions. In the early 1980s, there were only about a dozen people studying Chinese in the entire country.<sup>3</sup> Now, Chinese has entered Hungary's national education system at the university, high school, and elementary school levels. In Budapest, a city with a population of nearly 2 million, there are now several thousand registered Chinese language students.

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<sup>1</sup> Qian-Wang 2010: 18.

<sup>2</sup> China's Belt and Road Portal.

<sup>3</sup> Mei 1990: 127.

Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) and Pázmány Péter Catholic University both have Chinese departments, while other institutions, including the Budapest Business University, Dharma Gate Buddhist College, Corvinus University, the Semmelweis University, and the National University of Public Service, offer Chinese language courses. In addition to ELTE's Confucius Institute in Budapest, there are also Confucius Institutes at the University of Szeged, the University of Miskolc, the University of Pécs (i.e., the Traditional Chinese Medicine Confucius Institute), and the newly established Confucius Institute at the University of Debrecen. Moreover, there are two Confucius Classrooms: one at the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School in Budapest and another at Bolyai János Secondary School in Kecskemét. The Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School, established in 2004, is the only primary school in Hungary where Chinese is a compulsory subject, and it is also the only public bilingual school in the European Union that teaches in both Chinese and the national language. The establishment of the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School marks the entry of Chinese language into the primary and secondary stages of Hungary's national education system.

Regarding Chinese language teaching in Hungary, several scholars, including Sandor You (1988), Lichong Mei (1990), Qingxin Hao (2009), Yeping Qian and Honglin Wang (2010), and Xi Zeng (2011), have provided valuable overviews. These studies offer an insightful summary of the history and development of Chinese teaching in Hungary. However, there is a gap in the literature concerning the development of Chinese language teaching over the past decade, which is precisely the period during which Chinese education in Hungary has flourished the most. Building on the existing literature, this paper provides an overview and analysis of Chinese language teaching in Hungary, outlining its development trajectory to present a comprehensive picture of its history and current status.

## **Overview of Chinese Language Teaching in Hungary**

Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) plays a crucial role in the development of Chinese language education in Hungary. The Department of Chinese Studies at ELTE has the longest history, is the most specialised, and has the largest number of Chinese learners, making it the main focus of this study. The Department of Chinese Studies at Pázmány Péter Catholic University

was established in 2012 and offers both undergraduate and master's programmes. In the fall of 2019, the department had 85 students: 15 in the first year of the undergraduate programme, 20 in the second year of the undergraduate programme, 15 in the third year of the undergraduate programme, 15 in the first year of the master's programme, and 20 in the second year of the master's programme. Since its curriculum is similar to that of ELTE's Department of Chinese Studies, it is not discussed separately here.

Currently, Hungary has five Confucius Institutes, each with its own characteristics. However, the Confucius Institute at ELTE was established first and has achieved the most significant results, so it is used as the main example to present an overview of Chinese language teaching in Hungary.

## **Department of Chinese Studies**

### **1. History of Sinology's Development in Hungary**

The development of Sinology in Hungary can be traced back to 1923. 'In 1923, with the establishment of the Far East Institute at Eötvös Loránd University (then named Pázmány Péter University), Chinese language and culture studies also found their place'.<sup>4</sup> The first director was Professor Vilmos Pröhle, who not only was an expert in Chinese and Japanese but also studied Turkish. In 1942, Lajos Ligeti took over the responsibilities of the Far East Institute and also served as the director of the Central Asian Institute. He was a student of the renowned Sinologist Paul Pelliot and made significant contributions to the development of Sinology in Hungary. Lajos Ligeti is regarded as the true founder of Hungarian Sinology, having introduced the high-quality philosophical research methods he had learned in Paris into Hungarian Sinology studies.

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the importance of Sinology increased significantly. To highlight the significance of Sinology, the Department of Far Eastern Languages and Literature was renamed the Department of Chinese and East Asian Studies and was responsible for research in and the teaching of Sinology, Japanese studies, Korean studies, and Vietnamese studies. In the 1950s, the strengthening of political relations between China and Hungary facilitated cultural and educational exchanges

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<sup>4</sup> Hao 2014: 13.

between the two countries. Several young scholars had the opportunity to study Chinese, Chinese history, and literature in China for a few years. Some of them later worked at the Hungarian Embassy in China, becoming the first generation of Hungarians able to communicate in Chinese. Fortunately, many of them chose to continue academic research rather than pursue political careers.

In the 1950s, Chinese language teaching at ELTE was small in scale, with only a few students enrolled. However, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the scale of Chinese teaching expanded somewhat. In the 1980s, to meet societal needs, ELTE began to emphasise Chinese language teaching, especially the teaching of modern Chinese. Starting in 1984, one or two outstanding students were selected annually to study in China, and Chinese teachers were invited to teach at the university, significantly improving students' Chinese language proficiency. In 1985, Sinology was upgraded from a 'B-level' to an 'A-level' subject,<sup>5</sup> on par with English, French, Russian, Spanish, and German. 'Sinology became one of the university's most popular majors, with increasing numbers of applicants each year. The ratio of applicants to admissions was 2.5:1 in 1956, 6.8:1 in 1987, and 8.5:1 in 1988'<sup>6</sup>.

In 1995, economic austerity policy impacted higher education in Hungary, leading to a near halt in Chinese language teaching and Sinology research. However, when Professor Imre Hamar became the director of the Department of East Asian Studies in 2002, 'despite difficult conditions and a lack of sufficient full-time professors, [the] department began enrolling doctoral students in 2000, a historic advancement that ensured [it] could train the next generation of Sinologists'<sup>7</sup>.

In recent years, Chinese language education at ELTE has thrived, achieving remarkable results. The initial goal of the Department of Chinese Studies was to train Sinologists, but it has now evolved to integrate both Sinology research and Chinese language teaching. The department offers education at three levels: bachelor's graduates are trained as general Chinese language professionals who can work in fields such as tourism, hospitality, and general communication; master's graduates are trained as versatile Chinese language professionals capable of translating texts and interpreting at high-level meet-

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<sup>5</sup> The programmes offered at ELTE are divided into two categories, A and B, mainly based on the importance of the programmes and societal needs.

<sup>6</sup> Mei 1990: 128.

<sup>7</sup> Hao 2014: 13.

ings; and doctoral graduates are trained as advanced Chinese language professionals, able to become Sinologists (China experts). Since its establishment, the Department of Chinese Studies at ELTE has produced many outstanding graduates, including Sinologists, translators, and diplomats. In 2015, the department also introduced a master's programme in Chinese language education to train excellent local Chinese language teachers.

From 2010 to 2019, the department doubled in size. In the fall of 2019, the department had over 140 undergraduate students: 82 in the first year, 35 in the second year, and 23 in the third year. Additionally, there were eight students in the Chinese language education master's programme and seven doctoral students. In the fall of 2020, the number of first-year students reached 104, a historic high. Since 1984, Chinese government-sponsored Chinese language teachers have been teaching in the department.

## 2. Curriculum Structure

### (1) Undergraduate Programme

The undergraduate programme at ELTE lasts three years. First-year students in the Department of Chinese Studies, including both those majoring and those minoring in Chinese Studies, are the most numerous, and they make up about half of the total number of students. By the end of the first academic year, some students voluntarily drop out because they find Chinese too difficult, while others are forced to leave due to their failing of exams. Together, these two groups account for 40–50% of the total number of first-year students, while the remaining students advance to the second year.

In the second year, students are divided into two groups based on their performance: the regular class and the translation class. The translation class offers three additional courses and requires seven more hours of class per week compared to the regular class. After completing their second year, a significant portion of students apply for scholarships to study abroad in China for one or two semesters, before returning to ELTE to complete their studies.

The academic year is divided into two semesters: the fall semester and the spring semester. Each semester lasts three months, and after accounting for holidays and exams, the actual teaching period is approximately 13 weeks. The course structure is shown in Table 1.

Grade	Course	Weekly class hours
First Year	Modern Chinese 1, 2	6
	Chinese Ancient History 1, 2	2
	Chinese Mass Media 1, 2	2
Second Year	Modern Chinese 3, 4	6
	Ancient Chinese 1, 2	2
	Chinese Modern History 1, 2	2
	Chinese Ancient Literature 1, 2	2
	Chinese Audio-visual Speaking 1, 2 (Translation Class)	2
	Chinese Reading 1, 2 (Translation Class)	2
	Chinese Listening 1, 2 (Translation Class)	3
Third Year	Modern Chinese 5, 6	4
	Ancient Chinese 3, 4	2
	Modern Chinese Grammar and Linguistics	2
	Chinese Philosophy and Religion (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism)	2
	Chinese Audio-visual Speaking 3, 4 (Translation Class)	2
	Chinese Reading 3, 4 (Translation Class)	2
	Chinese Writing (Translation Class)	3

Table 1: Curriculum of the ELTE Chinese Department's Undergraduate Programmes

In the first year, three courses are offered: Modern Chinese, Ancient Chinese History, and Chinese Mass Media, totalling 10 hours per week. Modern Chinese uses the *New Practical Chinese Reader* as the primary textbook, with 6 hours of instruction per week. One Hungarian teacher and one native Chinese-speaking teacher jointly teach the course, each covering 3 hours. The Hungarian teacher is responsible for explaining Chinese characters and grammar, while the native Chinese teacher focuses on pronunciation and oral communication. The Ancient Chinese History and Chinese Mass Media courses are taught in Hungarian by Hungarian teachers, with each course scheduled for 2 hours per week. After the first year, students will have mastered basic Chinese grammar and learned over 1,000 characters, enabling them to conduct basic conversations in Chinese. They will also have gained an introductory understanding of ancient Chinese history and modern media. Their overall Chinese proficiency by the end of the first year typically reaches HSK Level 2 or 3.

In the second year, four courses are offered: Modern Chinese, Classical Chinese, Modern Chinese History, and Ancient Chinese Literature, totalling 12 hours per week. Modern Chinese continues with the *New Practical Chinese Reader* for 6 hours per week, again co-taught by a Hungarian teacher and a native Chinese-speaking teacher with the same division of labour as in the first year. The Classical Chinese, Modern Chinese History, and Ancient Chinese Literature courses are taught in Hungarian by Hungarian teachers, each with 2 hours per week.

Additionally, the translation class offers three extra courses: Chinese Listening and Speaking, Chinese Reading, and Chinese Listening, adding 7 hours per week. Chinese Listening and Speaking is taught by a native Chinese-speaking teacher for 2 hours per week, while Chinese Listening is 3 hours per week. Chinese Reading is taught by a Hungarian teacher for 2 hours per week. In total, the regular second-year students attend 12 hours per week, while students in the translation class have 19 hours per week.

By the end of the second year, students expand their vocabulary and grasp more complex grammatical structures. They are introduced to Classical Chinese, learning basic sentence structures and the differences between ancient and modern meanings. They also gain an overall understanding of modern Chinese history and ancient Chinese literature. By this point, regular students typically reach HSK Level 3, while translation class students, receiving more specialised training in reading, listening, and speaking, generally reach HSK Level 4.

In the third year, students study Modern Chinese, Classical Chinese, Modern Chinese Grammar and Linguistics, and Chinese Philosophy and Religion, totalling 10 hours per week. Modern Chinese continues with the *New Practical Chinese Reader* for 4 hours per week, taught by a native Chinese-speaking teacher. Classical Chinese and Modern Chinese Grammar and Linguistics are taught by Hungarian teachers, each for 2 hours per week.

In addition, the translation class offers three additional courses: Chinese Listening and Speaking, Chinese Reading, and Chinese Writing, totalling 7 hours per week. Listening and Speaking and Chinese Writing are taught by native Chinese-speaking teachers for 2 and 3 hours per week, respectively, while Chinese Reading is taught by a Hungarian teacher for 2 hours per week. In total, regular third-year students have 10 hours of class per week, while translation class students attend 17 hours per week.



By the end of the third year, students significantly progress in both Modern and Classical Chinese, gaining a deeper understanding of Chinese grammar, including linguistic knowledge. Regular students typically reach HSK Level 4 or 5, while translation class students receive professional training in reading, writing, and speaking, with most achieving HSK Level 5 or 6. Some students returning from a year of study in China join the third year, standing out not only in their language skills but also in their knowledge of Chinese culture and economy.

#### Key Features of the Curriculum:

- a. **Focus on Communication Skills:** The curriculum divides Chinese language courses into grammar and practice components. Grammar is emphasised through intensive reading, while practice sessions include pronunciation, speaking, listening, reading, and translation, with increasing focus on practice as students advance.
- b. **Emphasis on Cultural Knowledge:** A substantial portion of the curriculum is dedicated to Chinese history, literature, and cultural studies, taught in Hungarian, to provide students with a broader context for learning the language. Language learning is more effective when complemented with cultural understanding.
- c. **Importance of Classical Chinese:** Classical Chinese is a mandatory course for four semesters in the second and third years. This equips students with the basic skills to read ancient Chinese texts, deepening their understanding of traditional Chinese thought and culture, as well as modern Chinese, which is closely linked to its ancient roots.
- d. **Comprehensive Skill Development:** From the beginning, the curriculum covers various aspects of the language, including media studies. From the second year, especially for translation class students, courses in listening, speaking, and reading are added, with writing introduced in the third year, ensuring a well-rounded skill set.
- e. **Native Chinese Teachers and Balanced Faculty:** The department has a strong faculty, including nine teachers, three of whom are native Chinese speakers. This combination of Hungarian and Chinese teachers significantly enhances teaching quality and provides students with ample opportunities to directly engage with Chinese culture.

## (2) Master's Programme in Chinese Language Teaching

The master's programme has two tracks: the Chinese Studies MA, which is a two-year programme, and the Chinese Language Education MA, which is a three-year programme. In September 2006, with support from the former Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (Han-ban), the Chinese Language Education MA programme was officially launched. After completing the two-year Chinese Studies MA programme, students spend an additional year studying pedagogy and psychology. In the first cohort, seven students were admitted, with two students receiving scholarships to study for a semester or a full year at East China Normal University. The curriculum structure for the master's programme is shown in the table below.

Grade	Course	Weekly Class Hours
First Year	Modern Chinese	2
	Ancient Chinese	2
	Advanced Chinese Exam Preparation	2
	Chinese Linguistics	2
Second Year	Modern Chinese	2
	Ancient Chinese	2
	Advanced Chinese Exam Preparation	2
	Contemporary Chinese Society and Culture	2
	Advanced Chinese Reading	2
	History of Chinese Philosophy and Religion	2
Elective Courses for First and Second Year	Chinese Buddhism	2
	Chinese Linguistics	2

*Table 2: Curriculum of the ELTE Chinese Department's MA Programme*

In the two-year master's programme, the focus is on Sinology research. While continuing to improve their proficiency in Modern and Classical Chinese, students are also required to delve deeper into various aspects of the Chinese language and culture, including Chinese linguistics and contemporary Chinese society and culture. The number of admissions varies each year, typically ranging from 5 to 10 students.

There is no designated textbook for the master's programme. For Modern Chinese, *Boya Chinese Advanced* is commonly used, aiming to expose students to various reading materials and styles to help them express themselves accurately and flexibly. Classical Chinese classes build on the knowledge gain during undergraduate studies, continuing vocabulary and grammar development through the reading of classical texts and enhancing reading and translation skills.

The Contemporary Chinese Society and Culture course offers students a broader understanding of modern China's political, economic, and cultural background. The Advanced Chinese Reading class aims to improve students' reading proficiency in specific research fields. Like other courses, there is no designated textbook; teachers gather articles from newspapers, the internet, and other media sources, covering diverse topics in Chinese society, with both intensive and extensive reading exercises.

The history of Chinese philosophy and religion remains a critical component of Sinology studies throughout the programme.

### (3) Existing Issues

After years of accumulation and practice, the curriculum design of the Chinese Department at Eötvös Loránd University is generally logical, but there is still room for optimisation. In the undergraduate programme, the coordination and support between different courses can be further strengthened. Aside from Modern Chinese, which has a fixed textbook, other courses do not have designated materials, leaving teachers to organise and select teaching resources themselves. This freedom to choose materials does not imply randomness; it requires that materials across different courses be supportive and complementary both horizontally and vertically.

Horizontally, all courses in the same year – such as those focused on listening, reading, and integrated skills – should align with the themes and language points of the Modern Chinese course. This coordination not only helps to reinforce vocabulary and grammar but also deepens students' understanding of relevant content, thereby improving learning efficiency. However, given the limited availability of teaching resources abroad, it is challenging to fully coordinate different textbooks.

Vertically, courses across different levels should be structured progressively. For example, reading and integrated skills courses in the second and

third years need to be planned jointly by the instructors of both levels to ensure that the content is progressively challenging and interconnected.

In the master's programme, the interdependency between courses is relatively less prevalent, and each course's instructor can independently select appropriate teaching materials. The structure of the master's curriculum is also generally logical, balancing language with culture, history with religion, and Classical Chinese with Modern Chinese. However, the necessity of continuously having an advanced HSK exam preparation course throughout the master's programme is debatable. Replacing it with advanced listening and speaking or advanced writing courses would likely be more beneficial.

An advanced listening and speaking course could use audio-visual materials from formal settings, such as news broadcasts, speeches, etc., covering contemporary Chinese economic and political topics. The course could include teacher guidance, group discussions, and oral presentations, improving students' ability to understand and use Chinese correctly in formal situations. An advanced writing course would help students master various writing styles and genres, allowing them to write about relevant topics or phenomena with a focus on using advanced vocabulary and grammar. Both listening and speaking and writing courses would build on related undergraduate courses, ensuring that students' skills develop steadily and comprehensively.

#### (4) Confucius Institutes in Hungary

Since 2006, Hungary has established five Confucius Institutes, two Confucius Classrooms, and 53 teaching sites. As of 2016, the Confucius Institutes (and Confucius Classrooms) in Hungary have enrolled over 23,000 students, hosted cultural events with 266,000 participants, and administered Chinese proficiency exams to 2,661 test-takers. The five Confucius Institutes are: the ELTE Confucius Institute (partnered with Beijing Foreign Studies University; established in 2006); the University of Szeged Confucius Institute (partnered with Shanghai International Studies University; established in 2013); the University of Miskolc Confucius Institute (partnered with Beijing University of Chemical Technology; established in 2013); the University of Pécs Traditional Chinese Medicine Confucius Institute (partnered with Hebei United University; established in 2015); and the University of Debrecen Confucius Institute (partnered with Tianjin Foreign Studies University; established in 2019).

The ELTE Confucius Institute, located in the capital city of Budapest, was the first to be established and has the largest student body, making it the most successful. It has received multiple awards from China's Hanban (now the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation) and was among the first 16 Model Confucius Institutes worldwide. The other four Confucius Institutes are located in cities outside of Budapest, each with its own specialisation. For instance, the University of Pécs Traditional Chinese Medicine Confucius Institute focuses on collaboration and exchanges in the field of traditional Chinese medicine.

In addition to the institutes, there are two Confucius Classrooms: one at the Chinese-Hungarian Bilingual School in Budapest and another at Bolyai János Secondary School in Kecskemét. The Chinese-Hungarian Bilingual School, as a government-operated bilingual school, has evolved from a platform initially designed for Chinese children to learn Chinese into one where Hungarian students are professionally taught Chinese. When the school first opened on 1 September 2004, there were only five Hungarian students out of more than 80 enrolled, making up just 6% of the student population. By 2009, the number of Hungarian students increased to 66 out of 212, or 31%. In 2016, the school added a high school division, forming a complete education system from primary through secondary education.

As the teaching of Chinese continues to thrive, the importance of Chinese as a foreign language in Hungary's education system has become increasingly prominent. In 2010, Chinese was officially recognised as a second foreign language in Hungarian high schools, and in the same year, it became one of the eight foreign language subjects for Hungary's national university entrance examination (Matura). In 2013, the ELTE Confucius Institute also established the Central and Eastern European Local Chinese Teacher Training Centre, which annually provides teacher training for Chinese language teachers from 16 Central and Eastern European countries. The Central and Eastern European Chinese Language Teachers Association was founded at the 8th Central and Eastern European Chinese Teacher Training Event.

The rapid development of Chinese language education in Hungary has contributed to the growth of related fields, such as Chinese teaching and cultural promotion. Although the number of academic papers on Hungarian Chinese language education is still limited, efforts are underway. The ELTE Confucius Institute has compiled the first locally developed Chinese textbooks in Hungary, titled *Hungarian Chinese Textbooks* (four volumes in total)

and has also contributed to the compilation of a large Chinese-Hungarian and Hungarian-Chinese dictionary with over 80,000 entries. The Chinese-Hungarian dictionary has been completed, while the Hungarian-Chinese dictionary is still under development. This dictionary set will be available in both online and app formats. Notably, at the 2017 ‘16+1’ China-Central and Eastern European Summit, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán presented the Chinese-Hungarian Dictionary to Chinese Premier Li Keqiang as a national gift.

In October 2016, ELTE also established the world’s first overseas research centre dedicated to the Belt and Road Initiative – the Eötvös Loránd University Belt and Road Research Centre. The centre collaborates with China Publishing Group to establish an International Editorial Office, translating outstanding Chinese works into Hungarian. Nanjing Phoenix Publishing and Media Group has also set up a ‘Chinese Bookshelf’ at the Belt and Road Research Centre, regularly sending Chinese books each year. Additionally, textbooks for Chinese language learners in 16 Central and Eastern European countries are being developed.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that Chinese language education in Hungary has flourished in recent years, achieving remarkable results. The continued friendly relations between China and Hungary have contributed to the sustained popularity of Chinese, and the ‘Chinese fever’ is expected to continue growing. The record number of new students enrolled in the Chinese department at ELTE in the fall of 2020 is a testament to this trend. Moving forward, optimising the curriculum of university Chinese departments and continuing to leverage the role of Confucius Institutes in teaching Chinese and promoting Chinese culture are key issues that deserve attention.

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