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## The Growing Interest in Studying the Chinese Language in Central Asia: Motivations, Challenges, and Geopolitical Implications

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### Abstract

*The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has significantly boosted interest in learning Mandarin Chinese across Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan). Driven primarily by economic opportunities in Chinese-invested projects, trade, logistics, and scholarships, Mandarin has emerged as the second most popular foreign language after English in several countries. Confucius Institutes serve as key institutional drivers, providing language courses, cultural programs, HSK testing centers, and pathways to study in China. Quantitative evidence from HSK examinations shows dramatic growth: cumulative test-takers reached 143,000 by the end of 2024, with over 16,700 candidates in 2024 alone (a threefold increase from 2020) and approximately 50,000 participants in the past five years. Kyrgyzstan leads regionally with ~9,400 test-takers in 2024 and rapid annual growth of ~40%. Motivations are predominantly instrumental (employment 28%, travel 25%, cross-border communication 20%), though integrative factors (cultural interest, friendships) play a secondary role. Challenges include Mandarin's linguistic complexity (tones, characters), limited job market demand compared to English or Russian, lingering Sinophobic perceptions, and uneven returns on investment in language proficiency. Despite these barriers, expanding integration into national curricula and professional sectors underscores Chinese as a strategic asset in a multipolar economic landscape. The article analyzes motivations, institutional frameworks, trends, and implications for regional human capital and China-Central Asia ties.*

**Keywords:** Chinese language learning; Mandarin; Central Asia; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Confucius Institutes; HSK examination; language motivation; soft power; economic opportunities; language policy; geopolitical implications; cross-border communication

## INTRODUCTION

Central Asia's strategic location along the Silk Road Economic Belt has positioned it as a critical corridor for China's BRI, launched in 2013. This infrastructure and trade expansion has created practical demand for Mandarin proficiency to facilitate communication in cross-border projects, logistics, and commerce [Gao, 2020]. Concurrently, China's soft-power instruments, notably the Confucius Institutes established since the pilot in Tashkent in 2004, have institutionalised language education in the region. By the mid-2020s, Chinese has become the second most studied foreign language after English in several Central Asian countries, with four of them formally integrating it into national education systems [China Daily, 2025].

**Methodology.** This article adopts a synthetic review approach combining secondary data analysis, synthesis of existing empirical research, and integration of official quantitative indicators. No primary data collection was conducted; instead, the study relies on peer-reviewed publications, official reports, and media sources published between 2019 and 2025.

### Key sources include:

1. Empirical studies on learner motivation and strategies — Turkpenova (2023) employed a mixed-methods design: an anonymous questionnaire survey among students learning Chinese in Central Asia and Russia, supplemented by multiple oral interviews with learners and teachers. Responses were manually coded and analyzed; statistical data were processed in Microsoft Excel and visualized in charts/tables to identify short- and long-term motivators (e.g., employment opportunities 28%, travel 25%, cross-border communication 20%) [Turkpenova, 2023].
2. Chen (2024) utilized a mixed-methods approach with quantitative questionnaires (based on established strategy inventories) and face-to-face interviews among 110 Central Asian learners (predominantly from Kazakhstan N=57, Turkmenistan N=16, Tajikistan N=15, Uzbekistan N=13, Kyrgyzstan N=9) studying in mainland China. Participants (aged 18–39, mean 24.75; 60.9% male) self-reported strategy use; data were statistically analyzed to examine effects of gender, age, and learning duration (average 2.07 years) on preferences for social, metacognitive, affective, compensatory, cognitive, and memory strategies [Chen, 2024].
3. Policy and institutional analyses — Gao (2020) conducted qualitative document analysis of China's BRI-related education policies (e.g., 2016 Education Action Plan) and language planning documents to trace how Mandarin promotion aligns with regional connectivity goals.
4. Quantitative trends from HSK data — Enrollment and test-taker statistics were drawn from official Confucius Institute reports, Hanban/Center for Language Education and Cooperation sources, and aggregated media coverage (e.g., China Daily, 2025). These include cumulative test-takers (143,000 by end-2024), annual figures (16,700 in 2024), country-specific growth (e.g., Kyrgyzstan 9,400 in 2024, ~40% annual increase), and level distributions (e.g., >30% at HSK 4–6 in Kyrgyzstan). Data reflect administrative records from Confucius Institute testing centers and are treated as secondary official indicators

rather than independently verified survey results.

Synthesis involved thematic integration across sources: motivations and strategies from learner-focused studies were cross-referenced with institutional data (Confucius Institutes' role) and policy frameworks (BRI). Limitations include reliance on published English/Chinese sources (potential publication bias), varying sample representativeness (e.g., Chen's sample focused on students in China), and the absence of longitudinal primary tracking of proficiency outcomes or labor-market returns. Future research could incorporate large-scale regional surveys or mixed-methods fieldwork in local Confucius Institutes.

## Institutional Framework and Historical Context.

Confucius Institutes (CIs) constitute the cornerstone of China's educational and cultural diplomacy in Central Asia, serving as primary vehicles for Mandarin promotion, cultural exchange, and BRI-aligned people-to-people connectivity. The world's first pilot Confucius Institute opened in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in June 2004, establishing the region as an early priority for Beijing's global language strategy. This network has since expanded to 13 active institutes: five in Kazakhstan, four in Kyrgyzstan, two in Uzbekistan, and two in Tajikistan. Turkmenistan has none. Most partner with Chinese universities (often in Xinjiang), enabling joint curricula, teacher exchanges, and cross-border mobility.

Beyond language instruction, these institutes deliver a multifaceted portfolio: beginner-to-advanced Mandarin courses, cultural programs (calligraphy, Kung Fu, film festivals, and traditional holidays), teacher training workshops, digital resource development, and public events such as the "Chinese Bridge" competition. Critically, they function as official HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) centers, directly driving certification and scholarship pathways. In 2024 alone, the CI at Kyrgyz National University administered tests for 4,370 candidates, with over 1,700 in a single May 2025 session, while the Al-Farabi CI in Kazakhstan saw test-takers quadruple from 266 in 2013 to 1,148 [China Daily, 2025]. Directors highlight the institutes' adaptability: Chen Zhiguo (Kyrgyzstan) notes the "diverse demographic, from university students majoring in Chinese to civil servants, translators and those engaged in the trade sector with China," while Deng Hong (Kazakhstan) attributes growth to BRI projects, mutual visa exemptions, high salaries in Chinese firms, and e-commerce needs [China Daily, 2025].

As soft-power instruments, CIs explicitly promote Chinese history, culture, and values to counter Soviet-era stereotypes and foster mutual understanding. Early enrollment reached 22,270 students across the region, with 6,739 sitting HSK exams; today they support over 144,000 Central Asian students who have studied in China since 2000 [Aliyev, 2019]. Aligned with China's 2016 BRI Education Action Plan, the institutes facilitate language planning for policy coordination, infrastructure projects, and tourism. Four Central Asian countries have now integrated Chinese into national school and university curricula, with CIs providing textbooks, certified teachers, and testing infrastructure [China Daily, 2025]. Complementary scholarship programs (Confucius Institute Scholarships and BRI-specific grants) further amplify impact, turning language learners into future professionals and diplomats.

This article examines the drivers of this interest, the role of educational infrastructure, prevailing challenges, and emerging

trends. It draws on studies of learner motivations [Turkpenova, 2023], learning strategies among Central Asian students in China [Chen, 2024], BRI language policy analyses [Gao, 2020], and recent HSK examination data.

**Motivations for Learning.** Empirical research identifies several interconnected motivations for studying Mandarin in Central Asia, many directly tied to Confucius Institutes' offerings and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Turkpenova's (2023) mixed-methods study — based on an anonymous questionnaire survey of learners in Central Asia and Russia, supplemented by oral interviews with students and teachers — provides the most detailed quantitative breakdown of short- and long-term motivators. Respondents ranked their primary reasons as follows: greater employment opportunities (28%), travel intentions (25%), cross-border communication (20%), friendship establishment (15%), cultural interest (7%), and study abroad (5%) [Turkpenova, 2023]. The desire to work in or with China (often in Chinese-invested companies, trade, logistics, or BRI projects) emerged as the dominant instrumental motivation, reflecting pragmatic economic drivers amid China's regional economic ascendancy [Turkpenova, 2023; China Daily, 2025].

Qualitative insights from the same study and related research highlight diverse demographics: university students frequently cite

HSK certification as a gateway to scholarships and admission to Chinese universities (perceived as high-quality and affordable alternatives to Western options), while civil servants, translators, traders, and business professionals emphasize career competitiveness, higher salaries in Chinese firms, and facilitation of cross-border e-commerce and infrastructure projects [Chen, 2024; China Daily, 2025]. Younger learners (18–20 years) show stronger exam- and career-oriented drive, whereas older participants occasionally mention integrative factors like cultural appreciation (films, cuisine, history, Kung Fu) [Chen, 2024]. Confucius Institute directors reinforce these patterns: in Kyrgyzstan, diverse groups pursue Chinese for trade-sector jobs and trust-building in business dealings; in Kazakhstan, BRI projects, visa exemptions, and e-commerce growth fuel demand [China Daily, 2025].

To facilitate comparison, the following table synthesizes key motivations from Turkpenova (2023) — the primary empirical source with percentage data — alongside qualitative insights from other studies and regional reports. Motivations are categorized as instrumental (practical, goal-oriented) or integrative (social/cultural affinity), a common framework in second-language acquisition research.

Motivation Category	Specific Motivation	Percentage (Turkpenova, 2023)	Key Examples / Evidence from Central Asia	Instrumental / Integrative	Sources
Instrumental	Greater employment opportunities	28%	Desire to work in China or Chinese-invested firms; higher salaries in trade, logistics, e-commerce; BRI projects	Instrumental	[Turkpenova, 2023]; [China Daily, 2025]
Instrumental	Travel intentions	25%	Easier tourism and personal mobility to China	Instrumental	[Turkpenova, 2023]
Instrumental	Cross-border communication	20%	Facilitating business, daily interactions, and regional connectivity	Instrumental	[Turkpenova, 2023]; [Gao, 2020]
Integrative	Friendship establishment	15%	Building personal networks and relationships with Chinese people	Integrative	[Turkpenova, 2023]
Integrative	Cultural interest	7%	Interest in Chinese films, cuisine, history, Kung Fu; cultural programs at Confucius Institutes	Integrative	[Turkpenova, 2023]; [Chen, 2024]
Instrumental	Study abroad / scholarships	5%	HSK certification for university admission and scholarships in China	Instrumental	[Turkpenova, 2023]; [China Daily, 2025]
Instrumental (emerging)	Career competitiveness & scholarships	Not quantified (qualitative dominant)	Gateway to Chinese universities; competitive edge in job market; civil servants encouraged to learn	Instrumental	[Chen, 2024]; [China Daily, 2025]
Integrative / Mixed	Cultural immersion & soft-power exposure	Not quantified	Confucius Institutes' events (calligraphy, festivals); countering stereotypes; people-to-people ties	Integrative	[Aliyev, 2019]; [China Daily, 2025]

This distribution underscores that instrumental motivations overwhelmingly predominate (over 78% when combining employment, travel, communication, and study), aligning with pragmatic responses to China's economic footprint via the BRI. Integrative factors, while present, play a secondary role, often sparked by Confucius Institute cultural programs rather than standalone interest [Turkpenova, 2023; Chen, 2024]. Compared to English (which retains broader global prestige and versatility in non-China-specific sectors), Chinese motivations are more regionally targeted and economically contingent on Sino-Central Asian ties [Aliyev, 2019; China Daily, 2025]. These findings explain the rapid enrollment growth despite linguistic challenges: learners view Mandarin as a strategic investment for localized opportunities rather than universal applicability.

## Challenges and Barriers.

Despite the growing enrollment and institutional support from Confucius Institutes, significant obstacles persist that hinder the broader and more effective adoption of Mandarin Chinese in Central Asia.

Linguistic complexity remains the most immediate and formidable barrier. Mandarin is characterized by its tonal system (four main tones plus a neutral tone, where pitch changes can alter meaning entirely), logographic writing system (thousands of characters that must be memorized individually, with no direct phonetic cues like alphabets), and grammar that differs markedly from Indo-European or even Turkic structures (e.g., reliance on word order, particles, and context rather than inflections). These features pose particular difficulties for Central Asian learners whose native languages are predominantly Turkic (Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Turkmen) or Persian-influenced (Tajik). Turkic languages are agglutinative with vowel harmony, rich case systems, and no tones, while Tajik (a variety of Persian) uses an alphabetic script and Indo-European grammar. The absence of shared phonological, orthographic, or syntactic foundations means learners must build entirely new cognitive frameworks, often leading to higher dropout rates or slower progress compared to learners from languages with closer typological features [Chen, 2024; various linguistic comparisons in Turkic-Iranian contact studies].

Empirical evidence from Central Asian learners studying in China confirms these struggles. In a mixed-methods study of 110 participants (primarily from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan; aged 18–39, average learning duration 2.07 years), Chen (2024) found that students heavily rely on social strategies (e.g., group study, peer interaction), metacognitive strategies (planning, self-monitoring), and affective strategies (managing anxiety, motivation maintenance) to cope. Beginners depend more on compensatory techniques such as guessing from context, using gestures, or circumlocution due to limited vocabulary and character knowledge. Advanced learners shift toward real-life application and immersive practice. Notably, memory strategies — crucial for mastering characters and vocabulary — remain underused because learners perceive them as overly difficult and time-intensive. The study highlights demographic effects: longer learning duration correlates with greater strategy diversification, while age and gender influence preferences (e.g., younger learners favor social approaches) [Chen, 2024]. These patterns align with broader research on Mandarin acquisition, where the character-based script and tones are consistently ranked among the top challenges for non-native

speakers, often leading to plateaus around intermediate levels (e.g., HSK 4) due to vocabulary explosion and perceived endlessness of the language.

## Market realities further dampen enthusiasm.

While Chinese companies operate throughout the region — with Chinese nationals comprising over 35% of officially permitted foreign workers in Kazakhstan as of late 2025 (more than 5,600 individuals out of 14,103 total foreign employees) [Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Kazakhstan, 2025] — the number of positions explicitly requiring fluent Mandarin proficiency remains relatively small compared with those demanding English or Russian. English retains stronger global prestige and broader applicability across international business, education, technology, and public sectors, while Russian continues to dominate in legacy Soviet-era networks, migration corridors, and many regional enterprises.

Recent analyses and reports highlight this asymmetry. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan — where Chinese language interest has surged most rapidly — graduates and learners often target roles in Chinese-invested firms (e.g., in trade, logistics, e-commerce, and BRI-related infrastructure), where HSK certification serves as a key prerequisite and companies offer above-average salaries [China Daily, 2025]. Directors of Confucius Institutes note that knowledge of Chinese correlates with competitive advantages in cross-border commerce and higher-paying positions in Chinese enterprises [China Daily, 2025]. Similarly, vocational programs like Luban Workshops in Kazakhstan integrate “Chinese language + vocational skills” training, leading to recruitment by leading local firms in automotive, metallurgy, mining, and emerging AI sectors, signaling growing but niche demand [Xinhua National High-end Think Tank, 2025].

However, broader labor-market data reveal constraints. Kazakhstan anticipates needing up to 3 million skilled specialists in the coming years, with highest demand in public services (29%), business services (21%), logistics/transport (16%), and industry/construction (13–7% each), yet language-specific breakdowns show English and Russian as far more pervasive requirements in job postings and professional mobility [Times of Central Asia, 2025]. Across Central Asia, employment in Chinese-invested projects often prioritizes technical or manual skills over advanced linguistic fluency, and many positions are filled by Chinese expatriates rather than local Mandarin speakers [various BRI reports, e.g., 2024–2025]. Some graduates of Chinese-language programs report mismatched expectations: while opportunities exist in targeted sectors (trade, translation, civil service roles involving China, or return migration to Chinese firms), the overall volume lags behind English-related jobs in globalized industries or Russian-linked migration pathways [The Diplomat, 2023; ResearchGate/Uzhhorod University studies, 2024].

Some analysts explicitly note that “the difficulties with learning the Chinese language, the relatively small number of jobs where it is in demand, and the still strong position of English” continue to limit the practical effectiveness and widespread uptake of Mandarin, even amid rising enrollment and cultural interest [Aliyev, 2019]. This structural gap contributes to tempered enthusiasm: learners may invest significant effort in mastering a complex language, yet face uneven returns in local labor markets where multilingualism

(especially English-Russian combinations) often yields more versatile and abundant opportunities. As BRI projects mature and Chinese enterprises localize more operations, demand for proficient local speakers could expand — but for now, market realities temper the narrative of unchecked growth in Chinese-language utility.

Geopolitical and perceptual barriers also matter. Lingering Sinophobic sentiments rooted in Soviet-era narratives, religious differences, and concerns over debt or migration can reduce public receptivity [Aliyev, n.d.]. Language barriers additionally restrict access to Chinese media, limiting cultural penetration beyond formal education settings.

## Current Trends and Quantitative Evidence.

Data from the HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, Chinese Proficiency Test) examination provide the most direct and objective quantitative evidence of the dramatic and sustained growth in interest in studying Chinese across Central Asia. The HSK, administered by Chinese Testing International Co (a subsidiary under the Center for Language Education and Cooperation), was first introduced in the region in 2007. By the end of 2024, the cumulative number of test-takers in the four main participating countries — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan — had reached 143,000 [China Daily, 2025a; China Daily, 2025b].

In 2024 alone, more than 16,700 candidates sat the exam across these countries — representing a threefold increase compared to 2020 levels. Over the past five years (2020–2024), approximately 50,000 individuals in the region participated in the HSK, underscoring a strong and accelerating enthusiasm for Mandarin proficiency [China Daily, 2025a; Liu Xiaolong, deputy manager of Chinese Testing International Co, quoted in China Daily, 2025a]. These figures are based on official administrative records from HSK testing centers (primarily Confucius Institutes) and reflect paid registrations, making them reliable indicators of serious learner commitment rather than casual interest.

Country-level figures highlight particularly striking patterns, with Kyrgyzstan emerging as the regional leader in growth. In 2024, Kyrgyzstan recorded approximately 9,400 HSK test-takers — the highest absolute number in Central Asia — with an average annual growth rate of 40% over the preceding five years. This makes Kyrgyzstan one of the fastest-growing HSK participant countries worldwide during this period [Liu Xiaolong, quoted in China Daily, 2025a]. Over 30% of Kyrgyz examinees in recent years achieved advanced levels (HSK 4–6), which require substantial proficiency and are often prerequisites for university admission in China, scholarships, or professional roles involving Chinese companies. This shift toward higher-level certification signals that many learners are pursuing Chinese not merely for basic communication but for serious educational and career purposes [China Daily, 2025a].

The Confucius Institute at Kyrgyz National University (KNU), one of the region's major HSK testing hubs (established in 2009), exemplifies this momentum: it hosted 4,370 candidates in 2024 alone. In a single session on May 17, 2025 — the second HSK test of that year — the institute accommodated more than 1,700 test-takers, marking a record high since its founding [Chen Zhiguo, director of the Confucius Institute at KNU, quoted in China Daily, 2025a]. This single-institution figure represents a significant portion of national participation and illustrates how Confucius

Institutes serve as both educational providers and key drivers of certification demand.

In Kazakhstan, growth has been equally impressive at specific institutions. At the Confucius Institute at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (co-run with Lanzhou University), the number of HSK test-takers more than quadrupled from 266 in 2013 to 1,148 in 2024 [Deng Hong, director of the institute, quoted in China Daily, 2025b]. While country-wide Kyrgyz figures outpace Kazakhstan in recent annual growth, Kazakhstan's longer-term institutional expansion demonstrates steady institutionalization of Chinese-language testing and learning infrastructure.

These quantitative trends coincide with — and are reinforced by — broader structural integration of Chinese into national education systems. Chinese language courses have increasingly appeared in public secondary schools, vocational colleges, and universities across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. In several countries, national curricula now formally include Mandarin as an elective or specialized foreign language, often supported by textbooks, teacher training, and testing infrastructure provided through Confucius Institutes [China Daily, 2025a]. Additionally, civil servants, particularly those in trade, diplomacy, tourism, and BRI-related sectors, are being encouraged or required to study Mandarin, further expanding the learner base beyond traditional university students.

The region's youth increasingly perceive Chinese proficiency as a tangible competitive advantage in a multipolar economic landscape dominated by China's growing trade, investment, and infrastructure presence via the Belt and Road Initiative. High HSK participation rates, especially at advanced levels in Kyrgyzstan, correlate with perceptions of better job prospects in Chinese-invested firms, cross-border e-commerce, logistics, and scholarship-funded study in China — factors repeatedly cited by Confucius Institute directors and test organizers as primary motivators [China Daily, 2025a; Chen Zhiguo and Deng Hong, quoted therein].

Overall, the HSK data not only quantify enrollment surges but also demonstrate deepening commitment: rising test volumes, faster growth rates (especially in Kyrgyzstan), increasing advanced-level success, and integration into public education and professional development all point to Chinese emerging as a strategically important foreign language in Central Asia, second only to English in many contexts and rapidly closing the gap in targeted domains.

## Conclusion.

The surge in Chinese language learning in Central Asia reflects pragmatic responses to China's economic ascendancy and the BRI's connectivity agenda. Motivations centre on career advancement, educational mobility, and cultural curiosity, supported by an expanding network of Confucius Institutes and scholarships. Quantitative indicators, particularly HSK participation, confirm accelerating interest that now rivals English in selected domains.

Nevertheless, linguistic challenges, uneven job market returns, and lingering perceptual hurdles constrain deeper penetration. For sustained growth, stakeholders — both Chinese and Central Asian — must address teacher training, curriculum localisation, and public diplomacy that emphasises mutual benefit over dominance. Ultimately, expanded Mandarin proficiency promises to strengthen interpersonal and professional ties, contributing to more balanced regional integration in the 21st century. Future research should

track longitudinal proficiency outcomes and labour-market returns to assess long-term impact.

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