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# Why the Public Interest of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language Suddenly Increased in China: An Analysis of Baidu Index Data

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## Abstract

As the earliest name of International Chinese Language Education, Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) seems forgotten by the public in China for many years. However, Baidu Index shows that TCFL suddenly aroused much public's interest from the December 2023 and the interest has continued in some large cities of China during the last year. This study intended to explain this phenomenon through big data analysis and semi-structure interviews. Key findings reveal that firstly, a consistent surge in searches for TCSOL is observed during the Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges in China. Secondly, TCFL has regained prominence as a popular profession among women aged between their twenties and thirties. Lastly, the increasing demand for learning Chinese and the widespread adoption of online teaching have likely contributed to the growing popularity of TCFL as a profession.

*Keywords:* *Baidu index data, Public interest, Teaching Chinese as a foreign language, International Chinese language education, Teaching Chinese to speakers of other languages*

## 1. Introduction

While Confucius Institutes have spread all over the world and attracted great attention from the academia (Gil, 2024; Lien and Co, 2013; Lu and Hua, 2024; Song and Xu, 2017; Zhao and Huang, 2010), the public interest of International Chinese Language Education (ICLE)in China remains nearly unconcerned in the field of international research. In fact, ICLE has undergone a significant historical progression in China, encompassing three distinct phases: Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (1950-2004), Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (2004-2019), and International Chinese Language Education (2019-present). In July 1950, Tsinghua University prepared to establish a Chinese language course for exchange students from Eastern Europe, and it is the first institution in China that specializes in teaching Chinese as a foreign language (MOE, 2005). Since then, Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (*Duiwai Hanyu Jiaoxue*) has been well known to the Chinese people as a major and profession for more than half a century. In 2004, Confucius Institutes

began its global development; in order to facilitate the international promotion of Chinese language, the name of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) has been gradually replaced by Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (*Hanyu Guoji Jiaoyu*) (Liu, 2018). As a result, TCFL no longer appears in official documents of this major now, but is still a popular name of this profession among the public. The name of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) was changed to International Chinese Language Education (*Guoji Zhongwen Jiaoyu*) in 2019, aiming to integrate the language education for foreigners in China with overseas Chinese language education (Sun and Qiu, 2019). Despite that this major was officially renamed as ICLE at the September of 2022 (ADCSC and MOE, 2022), both TCSOL and ICLE are currently used at the undergraduate, master's and doctoral levels of this major. With regard to interest of ICLE among the Chinese public, the Baidu Index provides powerful support as a data analysis platform based on big data.

Baidu is China's largest search engine, with an 80% share of the Chinese market (Yeo, 2022). Baidu Index is a data analysis platform based on Baidu's massive data of online users, which is widely used in economic, tourism, medical and educational research (Yao and Chang, 2024; Xie *et al*., 2022; Fang *et al*., 2020; Li *et al*., 2018). The collection of PC data by Baidu Index commenced in June 2006, while the acquisition of mobile data initiated in January 2011 (Baidu, 2024). The three main functional modules of Baidu Index are: the trend research based on searches of a keyword via Baidu's searching engine, the demand map to reveal other search terms associated with that keyword, and the population portrait to display distribution characteristics of users' age, gender, region, and interests. Based on Baidu Index data, it is intriguing to observe that the term "Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language" (TCFL), which was initially coined, has gained more popularity in online searches compared to its later counterpart "Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages" (TCSOL) since the end of 2023. In this study, the keywords TCFL and TCSOL were utilized to conduct a comparative analysis of their trend research, demand maps, and population portraits through Baidu Index. The objective was to elucidate the reasons why the earliest name TCFL has regained public interest in China during the past year. Besides, it should be clarified that Baidu Index has not include ICLE as a keyword at present, probably due to lack of enough data of the official new name.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study is mainly based on big data analysis, supplemented by interviews. In terms of big data analysis, this paper firstly compares the trend changes of the two keywords -Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) and Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) -in Baidu Index. The trend research of Baidu Index contains search index and information index. To be specific, the search index reflects the change of degree regarding Baidu users' interest to the two keywords, while the information index illustrates the change in the number of behaviors such as viewing, retweeting, liking, commenting and disliking related to keywords, and provides links to the headline contents. Secondly, with the demand maps, words closely related to TCFL and TCSOL were displayed and compared in order to answer the specific concerns of the public in China. Lastly, the region, age and gender distribution were illustrated to analyze the characteristics of the population who explored the two keywords.

Meanwhile, the study involved semi-structure interviews with two ICLE teachers to further understand the results of Baidu Index data analysis. They were interviewed about their experience and views as private language teachers. Each interview was conducted through phone and lasted for about an hour. Audio-recorded were done with the consent of the participants, and transferred into texts for analysis. Two participants are Mia (pseudonym) and Shiya (pseudonym). Mia, an associate professor of ICLE, first taught international students Chinese in a university of China and then worked as a Chinese Language teacher in universities of Portland, South Korea and U.K. for more than ten years; and now she teaches Chinese in a British university and also works part time as a private tutor. Shiya graduated with a master's degree of TCSOL in a Chinese university, and worked as a Chinese language teacher in China and South Korea for four years, and is currently teaching Chinese in a public high school located in Abu Dhabi and working as a one-on-one Chinese tutor in her spare time.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Trend Research: Search Index and Information Index

#### 3.1.1. Search Index

As shown in Figure 1, Baidu's search index from January 1, 2011 to November 1, 2024 unveils that these two keywords attracted little attention among the public before 2013. However, since 2013, the search trend of Teaching Chinese to

Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) has shown regular changes, that is, there has been a peak in June and July almost every year. Furthermore, searches for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) continued to be quite low until the end of 2023, when it suddenly surged, far exceeding the searches of TCSOL. From 2013 to 2019, the summer search volume of TCSOL maintained a steady growth trend, and from 2019 to 2022, there was a significant decline, but in 2023 it quickly rebounded to the highest point, even exceeding the peak in 2022.
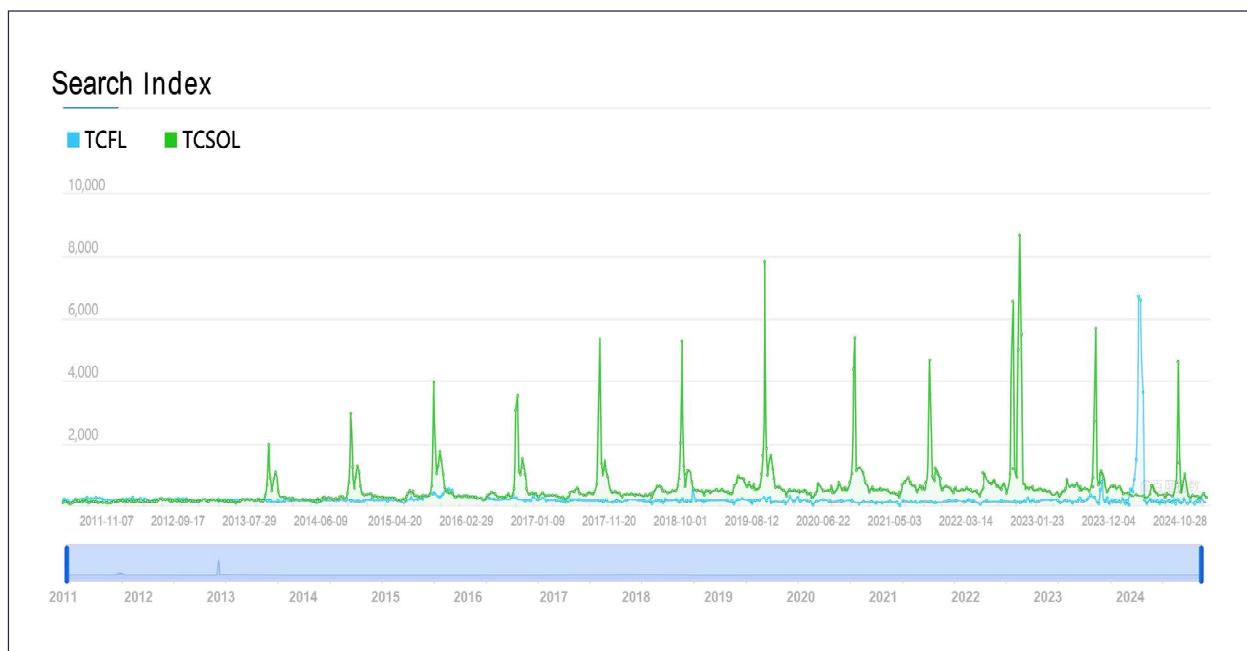


**Figure 1: Search Index for TCFL and TCSOL (2011 Jan.1~2024 Nov.1)**

In order to clearly demonstrate the fluctuations in search index, we have shortened the search period, i.e., from January 1, 2023, to November 1, 2024. As depicted in Figure 2, the peak of TCFL searches occurred between December 2023 and January 2024. Furthermore, the summer search surge observed in both 2023 and 2024 resembles patterns seen in previous years (Figure 1). To investigate the most prominent topics related to TCFL that garnered significant attention between December 2023 and January 2024, this study examined the data from the Information Index during the same time frame.
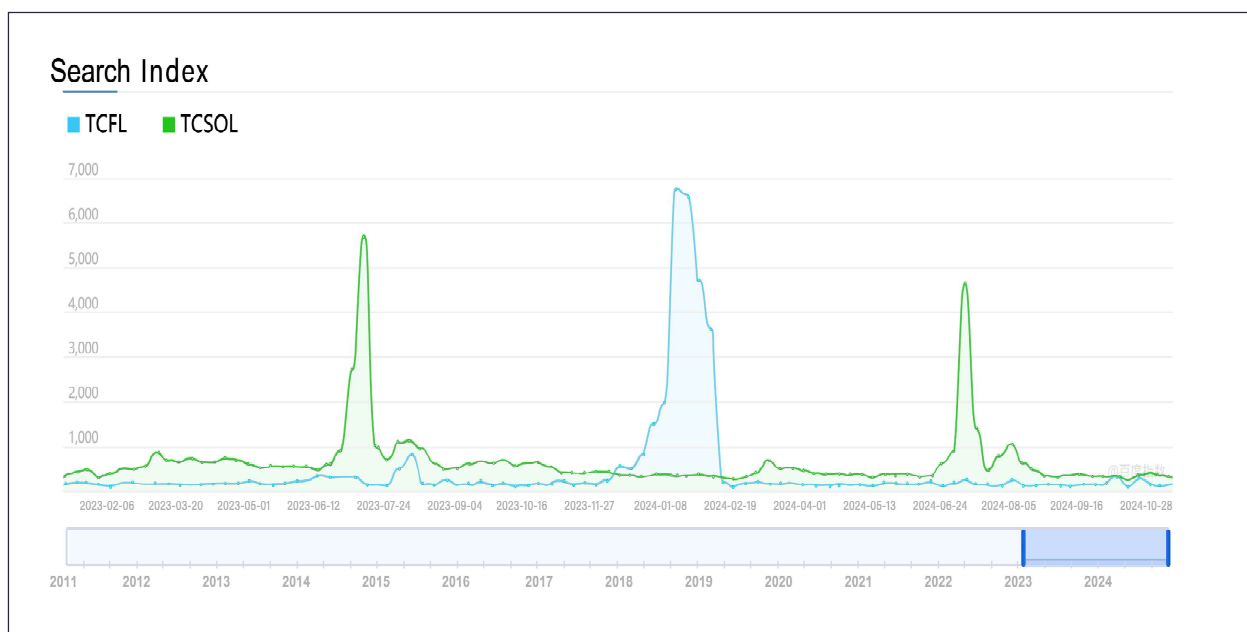


**Figure 2: Search Index for TCFL and TCSOL (2023 Jan.1~2024 Nov.1)**

### 3.1.2. Information Index

In Figure 3, the blue and green lines represent the changes in the information index of TCFL and TCSOL respectively, moreover, the two groups of capital letters stand for headline contents, that is, the videos or articles viewed, retweeted, commented on, or liked the most by Baidu users. For instance, the blue capital letter E positioned at the apex of the blue line is associated with two videos: *One-Click with Baidu Library AI for Generating TCFL Vocabulary Courseware PPT* and *High-Quality Materials for TCFL*. Similarly, the green capital letter H located at the peak of the green line is linked to two videos: *TCSOL: What are the Job Prospects? Saudi Crown Prince Studying Chinese* and *Global Chinese Language Craze,* and *How is the Internationalization of Chinese Now?* as well as an article titled *2024 Admissions Guide and Review Materials for Doctor of Education Program at Southwest University*.
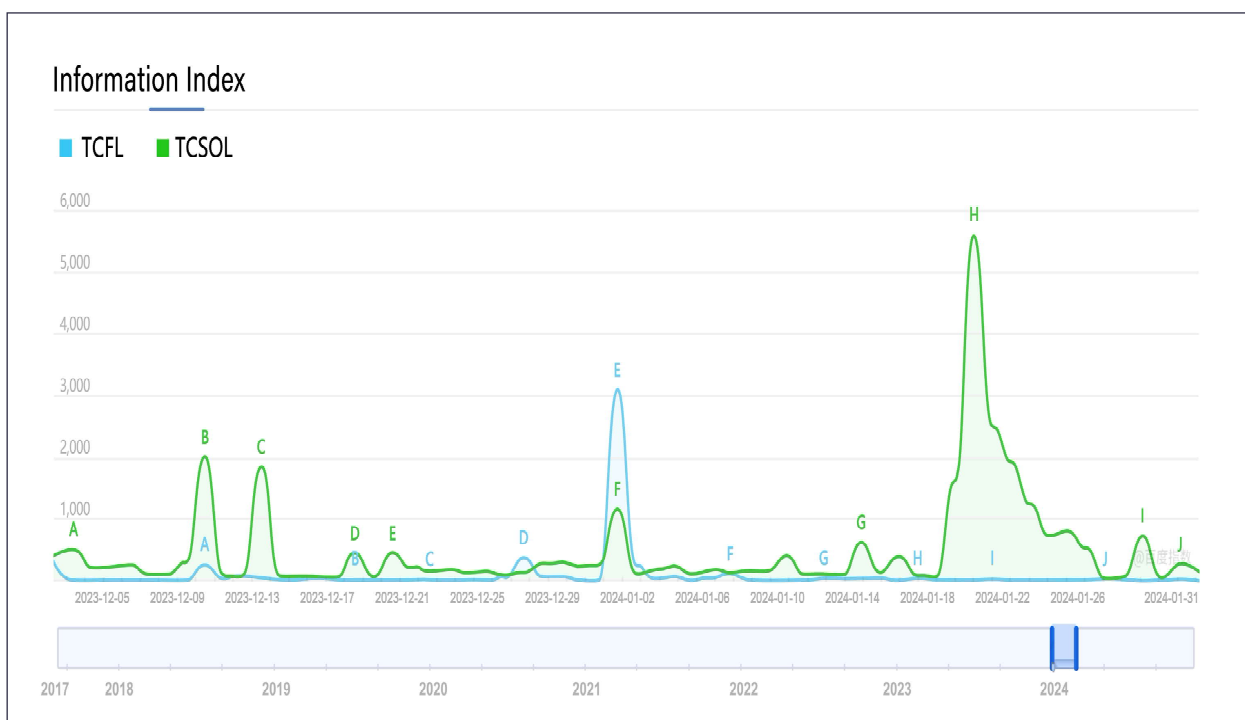


**Figure 3: Information Index for TCFL and TCSOL (2023 Dec.1~2024 Jan.31)**

As shown in Figure 3, from December 1, 2023 to January 31, 2024, the information index of TCSOL is generally higher than that of TCFL, but it is difficult to find the pattern of change. According to the headlines, as far as TCFL is concerned, videos about linguistics knowledge, online teaching design, courseware production and online teaching platforms have grabbed the headlines many times. With regard to information about TCSOL, characteristics of the major, postgraduate admission examinations and employment prospects of this major had received the most attention among the public.

### 3.2. Demand Maps

Demand maps are drawn as concentric circles according to the strength of the correlation between related words and keywords. The closer to the center of the inner circle is the stronger the relevance of the word to the keyword, and vice versa. In the meantime, there are green spots and red spots in the map, and the red one reminds us certain related words are more popular than others recently. Demand maps collect data from November 2023 to October 2024, but display on a weekly basis. Due to the large number of related words per week, this paper selected the most relevant words from two weeks and presented them in the Figures 4 and 5. The two weeks were chosen to illustrate the related words of the TCFL and TCSOL for certain reasons. As depicted in Figure 2, the search index for TCFL experienced a rapid increase in December 2023. Therefore, one week during this month was selected - specifically from December 4th to December 10th. The headlines presented in Figure 3 indicate that Baidu users have shown significant interest in information regarding postgraduate admission examinations. Late October of 2024 was the registration period for this national examination; thus, this study chose one week within this time frame - namely from October 14th to October 20th.
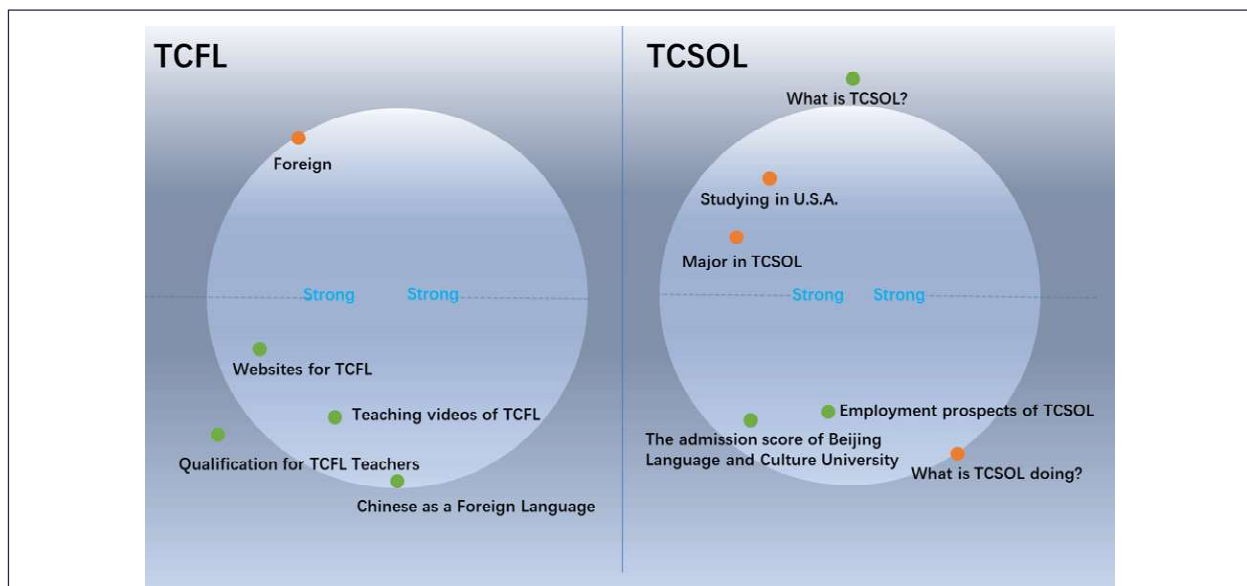
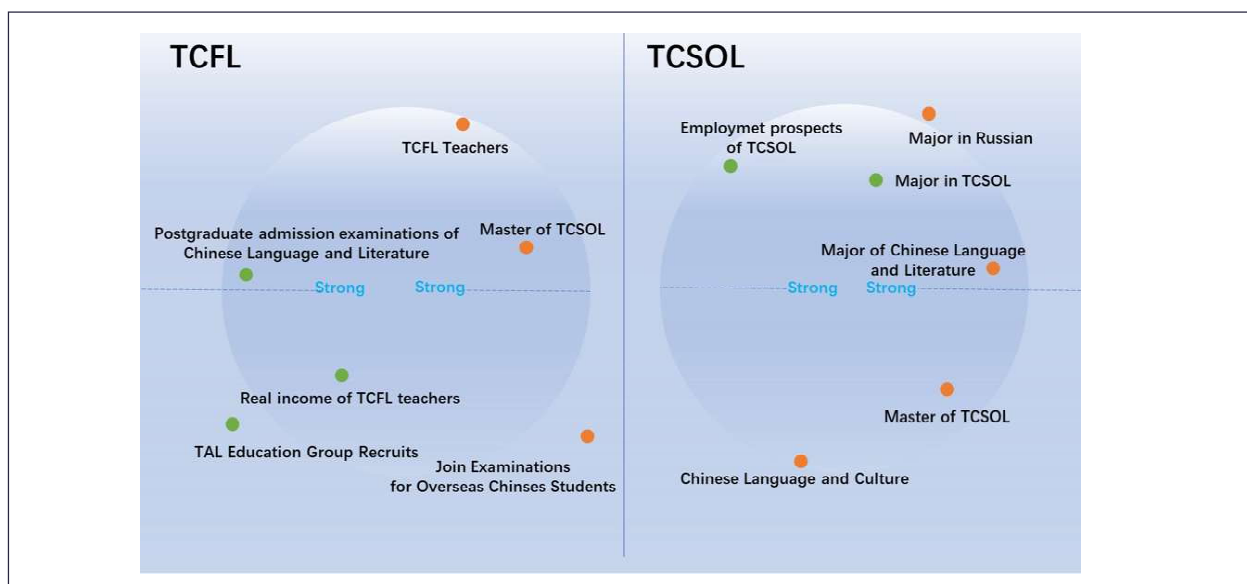**Figure 4: Demand maps of the TCFL and TCSOL (2023 Dec. 4~2023 Dec. 10)**



**Figure 5: Demand maps of the TCFL and TCSOL (2024 Oct. 14~2024 Oct. 20)**

As displayed in Figures 4 and 5, it is evident that both keywords are closely associated with another major field of study, namely Chinese Language and Literature. It should be noted that Chinese Language and Literature represents a broader category encompassing majors such as TCFL or TCSOL. If students majoring in TCSOL decide to take the national postgraduate admission examinations, they can apply for other majors in the catalogue of Chinese Language and literature, such as Chinese Language Studies, Applied Linguistics, Modern Chinese Literature and Comparative Literature. More importantly, we realize that the public is very concerned about teaching resources, teacher qualifications and real income when they search for TCFL. As for the major of TCSOL, the public wants to know more about the characteristics and the employment prospects of this major, information about the national postgraduate entrance examinations, and the possibilities to study abroad after graduation. As previously mentioned, demand maps solely depict the occurrence of related words on a weekly basis; hence, it is imperative to integrate them with additional data from Baidu Index before drawing any conclusive findings.

### 3.3. Population Portraits: Regional Distribution Maps and Population Attributes

The population portrait of Baidu Index includes three parts: area distribution, population attributes and interest distribution. The data on the regional distribution of TCFL and TCSOL can be traced back to July 1, 2013; however, it is

important to note that the data on population attributes and interest distribution only encompasses the most recent month, specifically from October 1 to October 31, 2024. Moreover, the interest distribution of the two keywords in various industries during October 2024 exhibit remarkable similarity. Consequently, this study does not include an analysis of interest distribution data.

### 3.3.1. Regional Distribution Maps

The regional distribution map can be demonstrated according to the province, area or city. Given that China has a vast territory and a large population, there exist big gaps between different cities even in the same province, not to mention the area. Hence, this study decides to present the regional distribution maps from the perspective of the city. From July 1, 2013 to November 4, 2024, the search volume for TCSOL (green) consistently surpasses that of TCFL (blue) in all cities, as clearly depicted in Figure 6. Based on the search index of TCFL, the top five cities are: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing and Shenzhen. However, Figure 7 indicates that these five cities have all witnessed more searches for TCFL than those for TCSOL in the past year, despite fluctuations in their respective rankings.



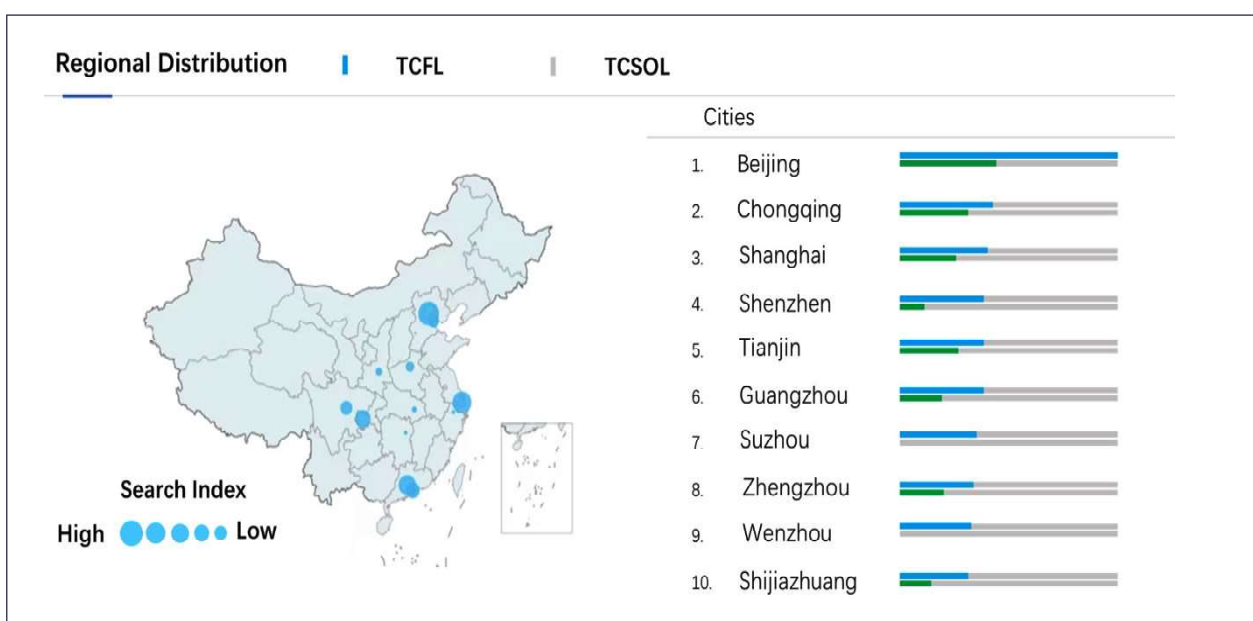**Figure 6: Regional Distribution Map of TCFL (2013 July 1-2024 Nov. 4)**



**Figure 7: Regional Distribution Map of TCFL (2023 Nov. 5-2024 Nov. 4)**

### *3.3.2. Population Attributes*

Population attributes are divided into two parts: age distribution and gender distribution. First of all, we find that the population aged 20 to 29 made up the highest proportion, around 40%. Secondly, people aged 19 and below manifested greater interest in TCSOL, accounting for more than 30% of the whole population related to TCSOL, and less than 20% concerning TCFL. Individuals aged between 30 and 39 exhibited a higher level of interest in TCFL, constituting nearly 20% of the population. Conversely, this particular age cohort accounted for approximately 10% of the total population with regards to TCSOL. The proportion of people aged 40 to 49 and over 50 are relatively small, and they show greater interest in TCFL. In terms of gender, female users exhibited significantly higher levels of interest in TCFL and TCSOL, constituting over 60% of the total population, while male users demonstrated a slightly greater inclination towards TCSOL compared to TCFL.



**Figure 8: Population Attributes of TCFL and TCSOL (2024 Oct. 1-2024 Oct. 31)**
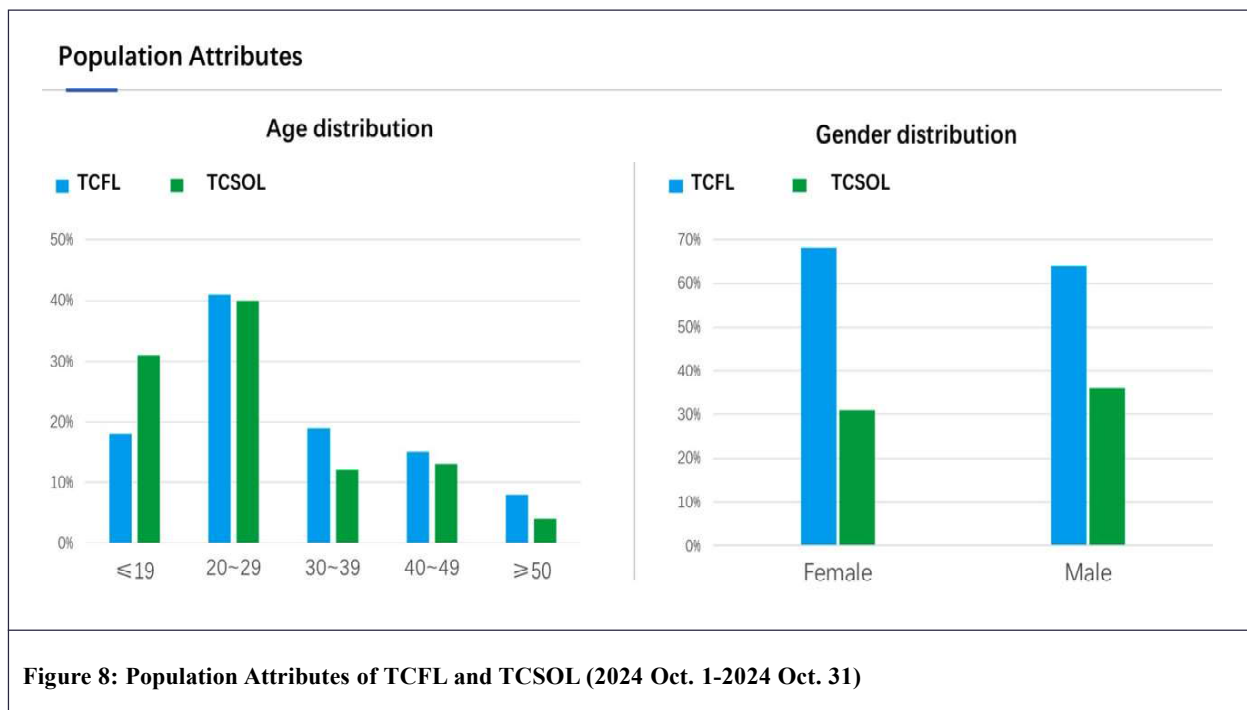
## 4. Discussion

### *4.1. A Search Peak Regularly Appears in Searches for TCSOL Around Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges in China*

In order to pursue higher education in China, high school students are required to sit for the Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges, commonly known as *Gao Kao*. The Ministry of Education of China mandates uniform administration of the *Gao Kao* across all provinces and cities nationwide, ensuring simultaneous commencement during a designated time period. For instance, in the 2024 examination, it commenced on June 7th with variations in test duration spanning two to four days. At the end of June every year, the results of the college entrance examination are published, and students need to decide to apply for which university or college as well as the major within July. Consequently, during the months of June and July, a substantial number of students and their parents engage in online searches to acquire information pertaining to majors of undergraduate as well as relevant universities and colleges. This explains why the search index of TCSOL forms a peak in June and July each year in Figure 1. In China, there will be a surge in the search for undergraduate majors before and after *Gao Kao*, which aligns with similar findings reported in a previous study (Tan *et al*., 2022). Besides, in 2012, the Ministry of Education of China promulgated the *Catalogue and Introduction of Undergraduate Majors* (2012), and the name of this major was changed from TCFL to TCSOL officially (MOE, 2012). As a result, around July 2013, the first search apex of TCSOL appeared.

In Figure 3 and Figure 5, it is evident that both TCFL and TCSOL exhibit significant relevance to the postgraduate admission examinations based on the information index and demand maps. The formal name of the postgraduate admission examination in China is The Nationwide Master's Program Unified Admissions Examination (or *Kao Yan* for short), which is another national examination held within uniform time period. Similar to the *Gaokao*, both before and

after *Kao Yan*, there is a rapid increase in search volume for majors and related universities or colleges. As mentioned above, TCSOL has gained more public attention as a result of the renaming in 2012. The two national examinations of *Gao Kao* and *Kao Yan* have significantly contributed to a substantial increase in searches related to TCSOL. Taking the year of 2023 as an example, 12.91 million candidates across the country have registered for *Gao Kao* (MOE, June 2023), and 4.38 million candidates have registered for *Kao Yan* (MOE, Nov. 2023). Consequently, this explains why TCSOL has led in search volume in major cities for a decade, as shown in Figure 6.

### 4.2. TCFL has Returned to the Public's Vision as a Popular Profession for the Female Aged from 20s to 30s

The information index and demand maps of the two keywords also indicate that the public's primary concern lies in the practical implementation of teaching and the actual income derived from this profession, rather than simply choosing TCFL as a major in universities or colleges. Therefore, the sudden surge in search activity depicted in Figure 1 likely suggests that TCFL has gained popularity as a profession rather than solely being considered a major. After all, TCFL has been replaced by TCSOL as the official name of this major in Chinese universities since 2012. In contrast, the primary focus of interest regarding TCSOL lies in its incorporation as a discipline within university curricula, the implications for national postgraduate admission examinations, and employment prospects. This indicates that public attention is predominantly directed towards deliberating whether to pursue TCSOL as an undergraduate or postgraduate major, rather than actively engaging in practical teaching or assuming roles as language educators. In other words, while public's attention to TCSOL is due to the popularity of this major in Chinese universities, TCFL has returned to the public eye because it has once again become a popular profession. To some degrees, the information index and demand maps elucidate why an upsurge appeared in search index related to TCFL from December 2023 to January 2024. Additionally, the regional distribution map of TCFL (Figure 7) also indicates that searches for TCFL have surpassed those for TCSOL in major cities over the past year. This implies that the interest in TCFL has persisted until now.

Meanwhile, in addition to teaching resources and pedagogical skills, the strong presence of relevant keywords on demand maps indicates that public concern extends towards the qualifications and actual income of TCFL teachers. However, ICLE was previously regarded as the primary occupation of university teachers in China due to its origins in certain colleges and universities catering to international students. Over time, the population of international Chinese teachers expanded to include expatriate teachers and volunteers, overseas local teachers, and part-time tutors, in which part-time teachers have received limited attention from the academic community (Liu *et al.*, 2024). The selection of expatriate staff for teaching Chinese overseas in Confucius Institutes primarily focuses on individuals who are currently engaged in or pursuing studies related to Chinese language and culture, ICLE, foreign languages, or education within Chinese universities (Li, 2019). The Baidu Index mainly reflects the search preferences of Chinese users, while overseas local teachers may not use the Baidu search engine frequently, so they are not within the scope of this study. Therefore, the sudden surge in public interest towards TCFL is likely not attributable to the limited number of teachers employed by higher education institutions or overseas Confucius Institutes, but rather to private Chinese tutors both within China and abroad. For instance, italki and preply, two large platforms specialized in online teaching for multiple languages, also offer Chinese lessons, with 988 registered Chinese teachers on italki and 4910 registered teachers on preply respectively (Italki, 2024; Preply, 2024). Although italki and preply also require applicants to provide proof of work experience, teaching qualifications, and educational background, it seems much less difficult to become a private Chinese language tutor than to be a full-time teacher of higher education institutions or Confucius Institutes.

As for the income of Chinese private tutors, Mia said that the income from private tutoring in Chinese even exceeded her income from teaching at the British university, the average fee of each one-to-one lesson is about 80GBP, that is 738CNY. Shiya said that her fee for teaching Chinese private lessons in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is 250 AED, which is about 488 CNY, but the fee for each Chinese tutoring lesson on online language teaching platforms such as italki and preply can be as low as 80CNY, which is still acceptable for many Chinese undergraduates. As shown in Figure 8, young women between the ages of 20 and 29 are most interested in TCFL, and these young women may be the college students mentioned by Shiya, since the female makes up nearly 70% of the whole population who search for TCFL. Moreover, women in their 30s and 40s exhibit a favorable inclination towards this occupation. They are more likely to possess extensive teaching experience as professional educators, thereby potentially yielding higher incomes compared to women under the age of 30.

### 4.3. The Increasing Demand for Learning Chinese and the Popularization of Online Teaching Probably have Made TCFL a Popular Profession

As shown in Figure 6, Baidu users in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Chongqing have shown a greater interest in TCFL than their counterparts in other cities over the past decade. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and

Shenzhen are the most economically developed cities in China, and Chongqing is an inland city with rapid economic development in recent years. In terms of GDP of 2023, the five cities also ranked in the top five of all cities in China (Wang, 2024). Among these five cities, there is a high frequency of international cooperations. Additionally, a significant number of expatriates reside and work in these urban centers. Consequently, it can be inferred that the demand for foreigners to acquire proficiency in Chinese may be comparatively higher in these cities.

On the other hand, the demand to learning Chinese overseas has also been increasing during recent years. In December 2023, it was reported that "499 Confucius Institutes and 793 Confucius Classrooms have been established in 160 countries and regions around the world; more than 190 countries and regions have carried out Chinese education projects, and 85 countries have incorporated Chinese into their national education systems through laws and decrees. Meanwhile, more than 1,300 Chinese proficiency test centers have been set up in more than 160 countries, with a cumulative number of more than 58 million exams. According to incomplete statistics, more than 30 million people are currently learning Chinese overseas" (Chai *et al.,* 2023). For instance, Shiya said that Chinese has become a compulsory foreign language in the public K12 schools of UAE, gradually replacing the original French, which is also happening in the universities of UAE (Hopkyns and Wang, 2024).

However, it is noteworthy that the search volume for TCFL has exhibited a significant increase in major cities over the past year, as is shown in Figure 7. This can largely be attributed to the growing popularity of online teaching, which has propelled TCFL into a sought-after profession among the public. First of all, the importance and acceptance of online teaching obviously increased among teachers and learners in the post-epidemic era (Gonzlez-Lloret, 2020; Goudarzi *et al*., 2024; Ling *et al.*, 2023; Patil and Undale, 2023; Yan *et al.*, 2024), although some researchers suggest that students feel more satisfied with the traditional teaching (Nedeljković and Petrović, 2023). According to the *Confucius Institute Annual Development Report 2023*, more and more Confucius Institutes and classrooms have explored online teaching, which has effectively solved the problems of lack of resources and teachers, and met the diversified learning needs of students, moreover, online teaching also motivates students to learn Chinese more actively (CIEF, 2023). Likewise, Mia mentioned in the interview that for adults, the effect of one-on-one online teaching is not much different from offline, and for learners and teachers who already have full-time jobs, online teaching is more advantageous to avoid travel fatigue, especially to prevent the inconvenience caused by the temporary paralysis of public transportation in U.K. However, both participants said that online teaching was not very effective for children, because it was difficult for children to stay in front of the screen for a long time, and children preferred communicating with teachers face-to-face.

Furthermore, with the advent of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) era, online teaching has become more powerful. With the development and application of AI products, such as ChatGPT, Sora and ERNIE Bot, AI can help teachers generate courseware, cases, games, scenarios and videos easily (Rahman and Watanobe, 2023; Adetayo *et al.,* 2024; Wijaya *et al.,* 2024). For instance, one of the headline videos related to TCFL in Figure 3 is about how to use Baidu AI to prepare classes on line. Meanwhile, the academia of International Chinese Language Education is also vigorously promoting the reform of digitalization and intelligentization (Cao *et al.,* 2024), such as exploring digital and intelligent resources (Yang, 2024), improving the digital ability of teachers (Du and Liu, 2023) and how to conduct teaching and learning evaluation in the future (Cheng, 2023).

## 5. Conclusion

From 2011 to 2023, Baidu's search index indicates that TCFL has received limited public attention, whereas searches for TCSOL consistently peak every June and July since 2013 due to the Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges in China. To a large degree, it is attributed to the change of the major's name in 2012, that is, TCFL was renamed TCSOL officially. Nevertheless, TCFL is a more familiar name to most of the public in China, especially as a profession, after all, the name has been in use since 1950 and only faded out from public view after 2004. Furthermore, Baidu's search index data reveals a notable upsurge in public interest towards TCFL by the end of 2023. Meanwhile, both the information index and the demand maps indicate a significant public interest regarding the qualifications and real incomes of TCFL as a profession, along with the fundamental teaching skills and knowledge required for practical instruction. In addition to the increasing demand for learning Chinese language as a foreign language in China and abroad, we observe that online teaching has emerged as a significant catalyst for the resurgence of TCFL profession. This can be attributed to the greater acceptance of online teaching by both teachers and students following the epidemic, along with the advent of the AI era providing substantial impetus to online teaching. In the near future, online teaching is poised to emerge as the predominant mode of ICLE, with an increasing number of Chinese individuals engaging in ICLE as private tutors; this may be an unexpected trend.

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