

Research on Cross-Cultural Adaptation of West Asian International Students in China under the "Belt and Road" Initiative: A Case Study of Arab Countries

Zhang Xin, Liao Caizhi*

College of Teachers, Chengdu University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610106, China

**Corresponding author*

Keywords: Belt and Road; Cross-Cultural Adaptation; International Students in China

Abstract: Against the backdrop of the deepening advancement of the "Belt and Road" Initiative, the number of West Asian Arab students studying in China has grown rapidly. However, their cross-cultural adaptation issues have become increasingly prominent, posing a key challenge to the quality of their overseas education and necessitating targeted support and intervention. Based on the theoretical framework of cross-cultural adaptation, this study conducts a systematic literature review to explore the adaptation challenges faced by Arab students across three dimensions—sociocultural (cultural identity conflicts, religious and customary differences), academic (divergences in education systems, unfamiliarity with teaching methods), and psychological (culture shock, social isolation)—along with their underlying cultural roots. The research finds that the fundamental cause of adaptation barriers lies in the differences between Islamic cultural traits and the Chinese social environment. Accordingly, this paper proposes systematic countermeasures from two levels: institutional management (improving cross-cultural service systems, establishing psychological support mechanisms, expanding communication platforms) and faculty development (enhancing intercultural competence, optimizing communication methods). The research outcomes not only provide practical guidance for improving the educational quality of Arab students but also offer valuable theoretical references and practical pathways for deepening China-Arab people-to-people exchanges and educational cooperation under the "Belt and Road" framework.

1. Introduction

Since the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's cultural and educational cooperation with West Asian countries has deepened, yet it exhibits a complex developmental trajectory. Between 2020 and 2024, the number of West Asian students studying in China did not continue its previous trend of uniform growth but instead displayed significant country-specific variations. For instance, the number of Saudi Arabian students dropped to a few hundred in 2022 but is expected to rebound due to Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" and enhanced Sino-Saudi educational cooperation ^[1]. Iran's student population remained relatively stable at around 3,000 ^[2], while the UAE saw a dramatic increase from just 5 students in 2023 to 70 in 2024, with plans to

reach 300 in the coming years ^[3]. This divergent trend reflects the varying progress in educational cooperation between these countries and China, while also indicating that Chinese universities will encounter an increasingly diverse West Asian student population.

However, as the number of West Asian students grows, Chinese universities face significant challenges in improving the quality of international education and support services. Cross-cultural adaptation issues are particularly prominent: these students commonly experience substantial pressure in language communication, academic expectations, sociocultural integration, and psychological adjustment^[4]. Communication barriers due to cultural differences, unfamiliarity with teaching methods, limited social interactions, and psychological loneliness severely impact their academic performance and quality of life. The root causes lie in the distinct collectivist tendencies, religious norms, and educational philosophy differences inherent in Arab culture, which create deep-seated obstacles to adaptation. Although the Chinese government has introduced policies such as the Quality Standards for Higher Education of International Students in China (Trial) and strengthened financial support and inter-university cooperation, systematic research and targeted support for West Asian Arab students remain insufficient^[5].

Against this backdrop, this study employs a cross-cultural adaptation framework, integrating Berry's Acculturation Model^[6], Ward and Kennedy's Sociocultural and Psychological Adaptation Theory^[7], and Chen Rongming's research on international student management under the BRI^[8], to explore the adaptation challenges faced by West Asian Arab students. The study focuses on three dimensions: (1) sociocultural adaptation, analyzing challenges arising from religious customs and social norms; (2) academic adaptation, examining conflicts in teaching methods and evaluation systems; and (3) psychological adaptation, investigating cultural identity and mental health issues. By uncovering the cultural roots of these adaptation barriers, this research aims to provide universities with targeted management strategies and intervention measures to enhance the quality and effectiveness of international education in China. On a practical level, the findings can inform the optimization of student support services; on a theoretical level, they contribute to a deeper understanding of the unique dynamics of Sino-Arab cultural exchange, offering new academic perspectives and practical pathways for promoting mutual learning among civilizations under the BRI.

2. Cultural Background and Characteristics of West Asian Arab Countries

West Asia serves as a crucial hub connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe, characterized by a long history, profound religious traditions, and rich ethnic diversity. The Arab countries in this region—including Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Yemen, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman—form the core of Arab culture.

2.1 Definition of Arab Culture

Arab culture is a comprehensive system centered on Islam while integrating multi-ethnic traditions^[10]. From a religious perspective, Islam is not only the foundation of faith but also deeply influences legal systems, ethics, and daily life^[9]. In terms of values, Arab culture emphasizes collectivism, family ties, religious devotion, and honor^[11]. Regarding social structure, it is organized around tribes and clans, forming a hierarchical social order with Islamic Sharia at its core^[11]. Historically, Arab culture has inherited the legacies of ancient Mesopotamian, Persian, and Greco-Roman civilizations, reaching its zenith during the Abbasid Caliphate and serving as a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures^[12]. Overall, Arab culture holds a significant place in world history due to its religious nature, inclusivity, and historical continuity.

2.2 Cultural Characteristics of West Asian Arab Countries

West Asian Arab countries possess long histories and deep cultural traditions. To better understand the cultural characteristics of West Asian Arab countries and their impact on the cross-cultural adaptation of international students, this article will conduct a detailed analysis from three dimensions: material culture, spiritual culture, and institutional culture.

In terms of material culture, West Asian Arab countries exhibit unique regional characteristics. Clothing culture fully reflects the combination of religious beliefs and natural laws; male attire requires simplicity and modesty to display humility, while women must adhere to the principle of covering and wear veils. Dietary culture strictly follows the Islamic principle of "halal," prohibiting the consumption of pork, blood, alcohol, and other foods considered impure. Architectural art, represented by mosques, showcases Islamic aesthetics through geometric patterns, symmetrical designs, and non-representational decorations, while also integrating diverse styles such as Persian and Greek.

In terms of spiritual culture, the region has a profound academic tradition, having historically been a center for scientific and philosophical research, with particular emphasis on educational inheritance and teacher-student ethical relationships. Religious culture permeates daily life; the five daily prayers and strict fasting during Ramadan constitute important religious practices. Literary arts primarily use poetry as a medium, preserving nomadic cultural traditions while carrying the function of religious and moral edification; artistic creation strictly adheres to the Islamic prohibition against figurative depiction.

Institutional culture presents distinct Islamic characteristics. The economic system follows Islamic financial principles, prohibiting usury, while being dominated by the oil economy and strong government intervention. Political systems often exhibit centralized features, either monarchies or presidential systems, with Islamic law integrated to varying degrees into the national legal system. The social system is based on family and tribal structures, emphasizing collectivist values, with clear gender role divisions, and the government maintains high control over the distribution of social resources. This unique institutional framework reflects both the influence of Islamic doctrine and the continuation of traditional culture in modern social governance.

3. Cross-Cultural Adaptation Challenges Faced by West Asian Arab Students in China

West Asian Arab students in China encounter a series of cross-cultural adaptation challenges, primarily manifested in sociocultural adaptation, academic adaptation, and psychological adaptation.

3.1 Sociocultural Adaptation Challenges

Sociocultural adaptation refers to the process by which individuals in a cross-cultural environment gradually acquire the necessary social and cultural skills to function effectively in a new cultural context by learning new social norms, values, and behavioral patterns.

3.1.1 Cultural Identity Conflict

According to Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, an individual's cultural identity is formed within their social environment^[13]. When international students enter a new cultural context, they often encounter conflicts between cultural values and behavioral norms, particularly regarding religious beliefs, family concepts, and social roles.

For Arab students, the significant differences between Islamic values and Chinese societal norms

may lead to cultural identity confusion. Taking Saudi Arabian students as an example, they frequently face challenges from China's secularized society and individualistic values. While Saudi culture emphasizes religious devotion, family obligations, and collectivism, Chinese society places greater importance on personal freedom and independence.

3.1.2 Dietary Adaptation Difficulties

Arab students face notable challenges in adapting to Chinese dietary habits. Firstly, Arab cuisine predominantly features grilled and fried dishes, whereas Chinese flavors and cooking styles differ significantly from Arab preferences. Secondly, while Chinese universities provide halal cafeterias, these are often small in scale and offer limited menu options. Although affordable, off-campus halal restaurants that cater to Arab tastes tend to be expensive.

Surveys indicate that students from wealthier countries like Saudi Arabia and Lebanon can afford off-campus dining, whereas those from conflict-affected nations such as Egypt, Syria, and Yemen struggle with the financial burden ^[14]. Furthermore, Arab students typically eat with their hands or spoons, while chopsticks are standard in China. Rice is the staple food in China, whereas bread is more common in Arab countries. Many Arab students report difficulty finding familiar bread in Chinese cafeterias, exacerbating their dietary discomfort.

3.1.3 Language and Communication Barriers

Data shows that Arab students struggle significantly with language and social interaction, particularly in comprehending Chinese emotional expressions and humor. Many Arab students report difficulty in "understanding Chinese people's thoughts," primarily due to stark differences in communication styles, conversation topics, values, and thought processes between Arab and Chinese cultures ^[15].

Although Chinese universities offer English-taught programs, language barriers persist due to varying English proficiency levels. Many Arab students face challenges in daily communication with Chinese peers, especially in informal settings. Additionally, Chinese communication tends to be indirect and implicit, whereas Arab culture favors openness and directness. Arab students are accustomed to expressing their thoughts and emotions explicitly, making it initially difficult for them to interpret Chinese subtlety and humor. Overcoming these barriers requires time, mutual understanding, and respect from both sides.

3.2 Academic Adaptation Challenges

Academic adaptation constitutes a crucial component of international students' cross-cultural adjustment, as academic pursuits are the primary motivation for most students coming to China. Key indicators of successful academic adaptation include achieving satisfactory academic performance, making progress in language proficiency, and completing required coursework on schedule.

3.2.1 Differences in Education Systems

Ridley notes that international students need to adapt to new academic systems, which is particularly significant for Arab students ^[16]. Substantial differences exist between China's education system and those of Arab countries, especially regarding examination systems, daily schedules, and classroom discipline.

The Chinese education system emphasizes rigorous examination requirements and strict disciplinary norms, with classrooms typically maintaining a quiet atmosphere where teachers

primarily serve as knowledge transmitters. In contrast, Arab students are accustomed to more interactive classroom environments with frequent teacher-student exchanges, often finding Chinese classrooms restrictive. Additionally, many Arab students struggle with courses scheduled before 9:00 AM or after 4:00 PM, perceiving such intensive timetables as encroaching on personal time [14].

Arab education systems tend to be more relaxed, with slower-paced lifestyles and less rigid time management. These differences necessitate significant adjustments in daily routines and study habits for Arab students newly arrived in China, presenting challenges in adapting to both the academic environment and lifestyle.

3.2.2 Challenges in Adapting to Teaching Methods

Degree-seeking Arab students face particularly pronounced difficulties in adapting to Chinese teaching methodologies. Research indicates that degree students encounter significantly greater adaptation challenges compared to language program students [17].

Language program students primarily receive Chinese language instruction from specialized teachers who tailor their methods to learners' needs. In contrast, degree students must engage with complex, discipline-specific content delivered by subject-matter experts who may lack training in addressing international students' unique requirements. Interview data reveals that many degree students struggle with instructors' rapid speech pace and conceptually dense lectures, resulting in limited classroom participation and comprehension.

Conversely, language students generally adapt more smoothly due to simpler course content and more targeted teaching approaches. Consequently, degree students express lower satisfaction with teaching methods, citing excessive pace and content difficulty as major barriers. This disparity underscores the need for enhanced support mechanisms for degree-seeking students in methodological adaptation.

3.2.3 Academic Pressure

Studies demonstrate that Arab students experience substantial academic stress, particularly degree candidates whose pressure levels significantly exceed those of non-degree students [18]. Ministry of Education statistics show that over half of international students in China pursued degree programs in 2018. Currently, many Chinese universities implement convergent management approaches where international students follow curricula nearly identical to domestic peers, except for political studies and English courses.

Interview findings indicate widespread academic stress among Arab students, especially those studying specialized subjects in Chinese [17]. Despite completing one-year pre-admission Chinese language training, these programs predominantly focus on daily communication rather than academic preparation. Consequently, students frequently must translate Chinese course materials into comprehensible forms before engaging with content—a process that not only increases workload but also delays academic acclimatization.

3.3 Psychological Adaptation Challenges

Psychological adaptation, as proposed by Ward within the stress and coping framework [7], refers to mental well-being or psychological satisfaction. Arab students newly arrived in China encounter distinct cultural traditions and often face significant psychological challenges.

3.3.1 Social Isolation and Lack of Support

The sources of social support significantly influence Arab students' psychological adaptation. Research indicates that Arab students who seek help primarily from compatriots tend to experience more negative emotions compared to those who seek support from Chinese peers ^[15]. While compatriots provide immediate emotional comfort due to cultural similarities, over-reliance on this support system may exacerbate feelings of social isolation and limit opportunities for host culture integration.

For Arab students, family and compatriots serve as primary support networks, offering both informational and emotional assistance that helps alleviate loneliness and facilitates environmental adaptation. However, excessive dependence on fellow nationals may hinder meaningful engagement with local culture, ultimately impairing cross-cultural adjustment. To foster comprehensive psychological adaptation, Arab students should prioritize building connections with local communities, thereby promoting multicultural integration and enhancing their overall cultural adaptation capacity.

3.3.2 Culture Shock

Culture shock refers to the anxiety and distress individuals experience when entering a new cultural environment due to the absence of familiar social cues or cultural markers. First conceptualized by American anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in 1960, culture shock typically manifests through negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, disappointment, frustration, and confusion.

Among international students in China, culture shock manifests particularly strongly through observable behaviors: individuals may become withdrawn and introverted, avoid social interactions, lose academic motivation, develop class attendance anxiety, or even contemplate returning home. Additional manifestations include reluctance to participate in group activities and increased irritability. These reactions demonstrate that culture shock extends beyond temporary emotional fluctuations and can profoundly impact students' overall adaptation process. When confronting these challenges, students must actively adjust their emotional and psychological states to effectively navigate culture shock and progressively integrate into their new cultural environment.

3.3.3 Mental Health Issues

Arab students studying in China often experience mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression due to being separated from their familiar home environment and lacking support from family and friends. During the cross-cultural adaptation process, factors like loneliness, culture shock, and academic pressure further exacerbate their psychological burden.

Research indicates that while most Arab students' depression indices fall within normal ranges, they still face significant psychological adaptation difficulties ^[15]. For instance, 23.08% of respondents reported frequent feelings of loneliness, reflecting inadequate social networks in China where language barriers and cultural differences intensify emotional isolation.

The study also revealed that female Arab students experience more psychological challenges than their male counterparts. This gender disparity stems from both the high expectations placed on women in their native culture and the drastic lifestyle changes they undergo. Traditionally living under stricter familial and social regulations, Arab women face greater emotional challenges and psychological adaptation pressures when separated from their home environment.

4. Recommendations to Facilitate Successful Cross-Cultural Adaptation for Arab Students

This paper proposes targeted recommendations at both institutional and faculty/administrative levels to enhance Arab students' cross-cultural adaptation.

4.1 Institutional-Level Recommendations

4.1.1 Enhancing Cross-Cultural Management Services for International Students

Universities should establish professional cross-cultural management teams specifically for Muslim Arab students to facilitate their adaptation to Chinese culture and living habits. Given the significant differences in lifestyle and religious practices between Arab and Chinese students, management approaches should balance differentiation and integration strategies.

The cross-cultural support teams should provide personalized assistance during students' initial adaptation period, paying special attention to cultural differences to ensure smoother transitions. Furthermore, institutions should actively promote interactions between international and Chinese students to break the "in-group/out-group" social dynamic. Through organized activities like group discussions and team projects, universities can foster meaningful exchanges that help Arab students better understand Chinese culture and accelerate their social integration.

4.1.2 Establishment of cross-cultural psychological support system

Mental health is an important aspect of cross-cultural adaptation, especially for Arab international students, culture shock, language barriers and academic pressure often lead to psychological problems. Therefore, schools should establish a comprehensive cross-cultural psychological support system to help Arab students cope with mental health problems. Schools can set up a special cross-cultural psychological counseling room and hire counselors who are bilingual and familiar with cross-cultural issues to provide professional psychological counseling services for international students. The establishment of psychological counseling room can not only help international students reduce anxiety, stress and loneliness, but also provide personalized psychological adjustment support.

4.1.3 Broaden Communication Channels and Extracurricular Activity Support

In order to help Arab international students better adapt to Chinese culture, schools should broaden extracurricular activities and communication channels, provide more interactive platforms, and encourage international students to participate in Chinese students' club activities and cultural celebrations. Through activities such as international cultural festivals and festivals, international students can deeply experience traditional Chinese culture and promote emotional communication with their Chinese classmates. Schools can also offer courses in which both Chinese and foreign students participate together, and utilize group discussions and teamwork to promote cultural integration and enhance cross-cultural cognition and communication skills of both sides. This kind of cross-cultural cooperation not only helps to improve understanding and eliminate misunderstanding, but also improves international students' cultural adaptation ability. In addition, schools can organize extracurricular programs for international students to share their own cultures, further promoting friendship and cultural identity between Chinese and foreign students.

4.2 Suggestions for teachers and managers of international students

4.2.1 Managers should go deep into the international student group

Managers should get to know the international student group deeply, form a high-quality counseling team according to the number of international students, and respect the individual differences of each student. Through visits and interviews, counselors should pay close attention to the study and living conditions of international students and take the initiative to identify and solve problems. In addition, counselors should receive regular training on mental health education to improve their ability to recognize and intervene in bad moods, so as to prevent psychological problems from causing emergencies. Counselors also need to have an in-depth understanding of the religious customs and policies and regulations of international students in order to better understand their psychological pressure and promote effective communication. In management, counselors should strengthen the convergence management, promote the communication and contact between international students and Chinese students, and enhance the identification and acceptance of Chinese students to international students, so as to promote the integration of multiculturalism and enhance the social and cultural adaptability of international students.

4.2.2 Teachers should grasp the main position of the classroom

Teachers play a vital role in improving the comprehensive quality of international students and promoting cultural adaptation. The classroom is not only a place for knowledge transfer, but also a channel for cultural guidance. Teachers should integrate Chinese history, culture and social norms into classroom teaching to help international students better understand the Chinese cultural background and enhance their cross-cultural adaptation ability. In addition, teachers should emphasize classroom interaction and encourage international students to ask questions and participate in discussions. Through group work, case studies and other teaching methods, teachers can promote cultural exchanges between Chinese and foreign students, help international students understand the way of thinking and learning habits of their Chinese classmates, and at the same time expose Chinese students to the cultural perspectives of international students. Through this interaction, international students' sense of academic engagement is improved and they can integrate into the Chinese academic environment faster.

5. Summary

With the deepening of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, the scale of international students from West Asian Arab countries coming to China continues to grow. The multiple challenges they face in the process of cross-cultural adaptation, such as language, teaching, religion, social support and psychology, reflect not only the deep-rooted differences between Chinese and Arab cultures, but also the inadequacies of the existing education management system for international students. Through the above analysis, it can be seen that colleges and universities and educators not only need to provide better conditions and services for Arab students at the policy level, but also need to pay more attention to differentiation and humanization in teaching and management practices, fully respecting and understanding each other's cultural needs; at the same time, Arab students themselves need to actively learn and adapt, and strive to establish a diversified social network and enhance their psychological resilience. Only through the joint efforts of all parties can we truly promote educational cooperation and cultural exchanges under the framework of “One Belt, One Road” and build a more inclusive, diversified and mutually beneficial international higher education ecology.

Acknowledgement

This paper is the research result of the key project of the Chengdu University Research Center for Civilization Mutual Learning and the "Belt and Road" 2023: "Research on the Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Enhancement Strategies of International Students from Main Countries along the "Belt and Road. The project approval number is WMHJTF2023B04.

References

- [1] Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education. Saudi-Chinese educational relations are expanding with a clear strategy for the future [EB/OL]. <https://www.moe.gov.sa/en/mediacenter/MOENews/Pages/Saudi-Chinese-edu-relations-.aspx>, 2022-09-12/2025-04-29.
- [2] What should Iran, China do to promote social-cultural ties? (N/OL). *Tehran Times*, 2025-04-29. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/497924/What-should-Iran-China-do-to-promote-social-cultural-ties>
- [3] UAE records increase in China-based scholarship students[EB/OL]. *Gulf News*, n.d./2025-04-29. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/education/uae-records-increase-in-china-based-scholarship-students-1.104520575>
- [4] IBRAHIM A E A S (Lan Ping). A survey study on cross-cultural adaptation of Arab international students in China [D]. Baoding: Hebei University, 2017.
- [5] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Notice on issuing the "Quality standards for higher education of international students in China (Trial)" (No. 50 [2018] of the Ministry of Education) [EB/OL]. (2018-10-09) [2023-10-15]. http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/moe_850/201810/t20181012_351302.html.
- [6] Berry, J. W. Immigration, acculturation and adaptation[J]. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 1977, 46(1): 5-68.
- [7] Ward C, Kennedy A. Acculturation strategies, psychological adjustment, and sociocultural competence during cross-cultural transition[J]. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 1994, 18(3): 329-343.
- [8] Chen Rongming. „Research on the management strategy of international students coming to China from countries along the Belt and Road“[J]. *China Higher Education*, 2017,(Z3):69-71.
- [9] Bernard Louis. *Die Araber in der Geschichte* [M] Beijing : China Social Science Press ,1979:26
- [10] Kong Linghua. Die Entstehung der arabisch-islamischen Aborigines und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Weltkultur[J]. *Qinghai Ethnic Studies*, 2007, 18(3):151-154.
- [11] Tajfel, H., Turner, J. C. *The social identity theory of intergroup behavior*[C]// Worchel, S., Austin, W. G. (Eds.). *Psychology of intergroup relations*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986: 7-24.
- [12] Ridley, D. Puzzling experiences in higher education: Critical moments for conversation[J]. *Studies in Higher Education*, 2004, 29(1): 91-107.
- [13] Yani Xi. Eine Studie zur interkulturellen Anpassung internationaler Studenten aus arabischen Ländern in China - am Beispiel der Zhejiang Normal University [D]. Zhejiang:Zhejiang Normal University,2015.
- [14] Sandra Ahmed El-Said Abbas Ibrahim (Lan Ping). Eine Übersichtsstudie zur interkulturellen Anpassung internationaler arabischer Studenten, die nach China kommen [D]. Hebei: Hebei University, 2017.
- [15] YUAN Limei. Forschung über die psychische Gesundheit von internationalen Studenten, die nach China kommen, basierend auf der Perspektive der frühen Intervention von Kulturschock[J]. *Journal of Qujing Normal College*, 2019,38(4):100-103.
- [16] Kim, Y. Y. *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation*[M]. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2001.
- [17] Zhou Yan. Ursachen und Gegenmaßnahmen des Kulturschocks [J]. *Journal of Chongqing Institute of Science and Technology: Social Science Edition*, 2009(03): 180-182.
- [18] Chen Chuanzhong, Chen Xifeng. Ein Überblick über die Forschung zu psychologischen Anpassungsproblemen von internationalen Studenten[J]. *Literatur und Bildungsmaterialien*, 2010(12):227-228.