

# *Cross-Cultural Adaptation of African Students in China under the Belt and Road Initiative: A Case Study of Egypt, Algeria, the Republic of the Congo, and Uganda*

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**Abstract:** With the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China–Africa educational cooperation has intensified, leading to a steady increase in the number of African students studying in China. However, due to differences in cultural backgrounds and value systems, many African students face challenges in adapting to life in China. Using a literature review methodology, this study examines the cultural backgrounds of African students in China and identifies key challenges they face in adapting to daily life, academics, mental health, and interpersonal communication. The analysis further explores how these difficulties are rooted in cultural differences. Drawing on these findings, the study proposes strategies to enhance cultural adaptation, including strengthening social and cultural integration, optimizing academic support, developing peer and psychological support systems, and improving policy safeguards. The goal is to improve African students' adaptive capacity, foster mutual understanding between China and Africa, and advance international educational cooperation.

## 1. Introduction

With the continuous expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China–Africa relations have extended beyond trade to encompass scientific and educational exchanges. According to China's Ministry of Education, by 2018, China hosted 492,185 international students, of whom 81,562 were from Africa, accounting for 16.57%. China has become the second most popular destination for African students, following France<sup>[1]</sup>. This reflects China's growing appeal in global higher education, particularly among African countries.

To strengthen people-to-people ties under the BRI framework, attention to the cultural adaptation of African students in China is essential. Cultural adaptation is a crucial process for international students' successful integration into academic and social life. Understanding the cultural backgrounds and adaptation challenges of African students may help to mitigate intercultural conflicts and promote their holistic development. Moreover, such research contributes to the internationalization of Chinese education and provides insights for future global collaboration.

Although many existing studies on cross-cultural adaptation use surveys or interviews to assess

the experiences of international students, focused research on African students remains limited. This study employs literature analysis to examine the cultural characteristics of African students' countries of origin and explore the root causes of their adaptation challenges in China. Based on this, the study proposes targeted strategies and policy recommendations to support their adjustment and to provide practical guidance for Chinese universities and policymakers.

## **2. Cultural Characteristics of African Countries under the Belt and Road Initiative**

### **2.1 Foundations of African Civilization and Culture**

#### **2.1.1 Religious Beliefs**

Africa's religious landscape is pluralistic, shaped by indigenous beliefs and the later spread of Christianity and Islam during colonial rule<sup>[2]</sup>. Belief systems vary across and within countries: Egypt and Algeria are predominantly Muslim, while Uganda practices religious freedom with a mix of Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and traditional animist beliefs<sup>[3]</sup>.

Religion in Africa plays a significant role in shaping social norms, moral codes, and worldviews. For Muslims, prayer is a spiritual obligation, reflecting a life guided by divine purpose<sup>[4]</sup>. Traditional African religions emphasize harmony with nature and spiritual forces, forming a cultural core centered on faith and reverence for the natural world<sup>[5]</sup>.

#### **2.1.2 Language Systems**

Africa is home to approximately 100 widely spoken languages, with most countries being multilingual. Indigenous tongues, mainly from the Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic families, coexist with colonial languages like English, French, and Arabic, which now serve as lingua francas<sup>[6]</sup>.

In Algeria and Egypt, Arabic is official, but French and English are also prevalent in education and business<sup>[4][7]</sup>. Mandarin Chinese, by contrast, differs significantly from African languages in phonology, syntax, and writing systems, presenting notable challenges for linguistic exchange<sup>[8]</sup>.

## **2.2 Lifestyles and Customs in African Regions**

### **2.2.1 Dietary Habits and Eating Customs**

African cuisines blend tribal traditions with colonial influences, often shaped by religious and environmental factors. Islamic dietary laws, for example, prohibit pork and certain seafood. Staples like maize, plantains, and cassava are common, with roasting as a favored method<sup>[9][10]</sup>.

Urbanization and globalization have introduced Western foods, and formal dining customs have evolved, especially among elites who emulate European etiquette. Nonetheless, traditional communal eating persists in rural areas [10].

### **2.2.2 Media Use and Information Access**

While China entered the digital age early, Africa continues to rely significantly on radio and television. As of 2023, pay-TV subscribers reached 43 million, with content focusing on entertainment, news, sports, and religion<sup>[11][12]</sup>.

Digital media is expanding rapidly, with 571 million internet users by 2022. However, platform preferences differ from China: Facebook dominates (73.4%), followed by YouTube, Instagram, and others<sup>[13]</sup>.

### 2.2.3 Cultural and Recreational Activities

Sports, especially football, are central to youth culture and communal life in Africa, with spontaneous games common across regions<sup>[14]</sup>.

Music is deeply embedded in everyday life and social rituals. Beyond traditional drumming, modern genres like Afrobeat, reggae, and hip-hop have gained popularity, reflecting both ethnic identity and global influences<sup>[15][16]</sup>.

### 2.2.4 Social Customs

African cultures often adopt low-context communication styles—clear, direct, and focused on the clarity and precision of meaning<sup>[17]</sup>. People are generally warm, cheerful, and expressive, using gestures like hugs or cheek-kissing to show friendliness<sup>[9]</sup>.

## 2.3 Humanistic and Spiritual Culture in Africa

### 2.3.1 Culture and Values

Cultural transmission in Africa largely relies on oral traditions and communal practices rather than written documentation. Shared values are embedded in religious teachings and customary practices. In Arab-influenced cultures shaped by desert life, autonomy and resistance to external control are highly valued, often expressed through a relaxed attitude toward punctuality and institutional authority<sup>[5][18][19]</sup>.

African societies are generally present-oriented and optimistic, placing limited emphasis on material accumulation. This worldview aligns with Islamic teachings that prioritize the afterlife over worldly possessions<sup>[4][20]</sup>.

Despite this relaxed stance on wealth, family occupies a central role in African life. Strong kinship bonds offer both emotional support and social identity, even as young people pursue increasing independence. As Bourdieu noted, in societies such as Algeria, the family functions both as a survival mechanism and as a source of psychological and social stability<sup>[21]</sup>.

## 3. Cross-Cultural Adaptation Issues Arising from Cultural Differences

### 3.1 Adaptation to Social and Daily Life

#### 3.1.1 Differences in Social Life and Cultural-Sports Activities

Chinese society places a high value on order, collective harmony, and adherence to rules, which contrasts with the individualism prevalent in many African cultures<sup>[18]</sup>. African students in China may find themselves subject to stricter institutional regulations, such as curfews, mandatory class attendance, and formal application processes for using public spaces. These constraints can cause discomfort and adjustment difficulties.

Recreational preferences also diverge. While Chinese students often engage in small-group or solitary activities organized top-down, African students typically prefer communal gatherings, particularly those involving music and sports. Unfortunately, many Chinese universities lack adequate sports infrastructure, and only 59.66% offer physical education courses for international students<sup>[22][23]</sup>. Furthermore, Chinese music tends to be introspective and serene, contrasting with the vibrant and energetic musical styles favored by many African students. These differences can limit opportunities for meaningful social interaction and cultural expression.

### 3.1.2 Differences in Dietary and Dining Habits

African diets are typically protein-rich, in contrast to the grain- and vegetable-focused Chinese cuisine. Staples such as bread, salads, and a wide range of spices are not commonly available in China. In addition, Chinese culinary customs—such as communal dining and the use of chopsticks—may be unfamiliar and challenging to adapt to.

Although takeout is widespread and convenient, vendors rarely disclose full ingredient lists, which poses risks for students with religious dietary restrictions<sup>[24]</sup>. While many African students find Chinese food flavorful, unfamiliar ingredients and dining etiquette may hinder their ability to maintain their traditional diets or fully adjust to local food practices.

### 3.1.3 Differences in Media and Information Platforms

China's digital environment is dominated by domestic platforms like WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, while many globally popular African platforms are inaccessible. This digital divide forces African students to learn new tools to communicate with their families or stay informed about their home countries, increasing their adaptation burden.

## 3.2 Academic Adaptation Issues

### 3.2.1 Language Barriers Causing Learning Difficulties

The linguistic gap between Chinese and African languages is profound. Chinese employs intricate verb constructions and dense syntactic packaging, which poses major difficulties for African learners<sup>[8][25]</sup>. Since Chinese serves not only as a classroom subject but also as a medium for daily life and academic activities, language challenges significantly impact both academic success and social integration.

Although English is increasingly used in Chinese universities, many faculty members—especially senior ones—have limited proficiency or strong accents, which may further hinder communication and classroom engagement.

### 3.2.2 Differences in Cognitive Styles

Chinese education, rooted in collectivist traditions, emphasizes group performance, integrative thinking, and memorization. This stands in contrast to the independent, goal-oriented learning styles commonly observed in African students. When teaching methods are not tailored to accommodate these differences, students may experience mismatched expectations, weakened teacher-student rapport, and diminished academic self-confidence.

## 3.3 Psychological and Interpersonal Adaptation Issues

### 3.3.1 Differences in Communication Styles

African cultures generally favor low-context communication—direct, explicit, and focused on verbal clarity—whereas Chinese communication tends to be high-context, relying on subtle cues, indirect expressions, and situational context<sup>[26]</sup>. For example, Chinese people often avoid explicit refusals and instead rely on implied meanings, which can confuse newcomers. In addition, emotional restraint and a preference for interpersonal boundaries may be perceived by African students as indifference or coldness.

These cultural discrepancies can reduce the accuracy of emotional interpretation and weaken communication effectiveness<sup>[17]</sup>.

### 3.3.2 Gaps in Culture and Values

Many African students maintain strong religious practices and a belief in spiritual or afterlife rewards, while Chinese society is largely secular, emphasizing health, longevity, and practical success. These value differences may lead to misunderstandings or insufficient institutional support for religious needs <sup>[4]</sup>.

Furthermore, influenced by Confucian values, Chinese people tend to adopt cautious, pragmatic life strategies, while African cultures often promote optimism and present-moment enjoyment. These differing perspectives can affect daily interactions and deepen mutual misunderstandings <sup>[20]</sup>.

### 3.3.3 Loneliness and Psychological Adaptation Challenges

Time zone differences, academic pressures, and the inaccessibility of familiar digital platforms reduce African students' opportunities to maintain close contact with family, weakening an essential source of emotional support.

Moreover, cultural, linguistic, and racial differences can limit social integration within the local community while simultaneously distancing students from their original support networks. These challenges can contribute to loneliness, homesickness, and psychological stress, negatively impacting their overall study abroad experience.

## 4. Prevention, Solutions, and Recommendations

### 4.1 Social Support and Cultural Integration

To enhance the social acceptance and cultural integration of African international students, universities and local communities should organize intercultural exchange activities and promote understanding through diverse media campaigns. Events such as international food festivals, cultural performances, and joint sports competitions can foster mutual appreciation, reduce cultural misunderstandings, and help Chinese and African students discover shared interests.

At the same time, institutions should provide facilities that accommodate diverse religious and cultural needs—such as prayer rooms and halal dining options. Establishing cultural centers or multifunctional community spaces can offer African students opportunities to express their cultural identities, engage in faith-based practices, and participate in community life.

### 4.2 Academic Support Systems

Universities should strengthen and localize their language education systems. Chinese language courses should be adapted to the linguistic backgrounds of African students by offering specialized tutoring, developing targeted learning materials, and, where appropriate, incorporating African languages as auxiliary tools. A designated language adaptation period for newly arrived students can provide intensive support to help them transition more smoothly.

In addition, teaching methods should be diversified. Instructors are encouraged to adopt approaches such as case-based learning, task-driven instruction, and project-based collaboration to better align with African students' practical and goal-oriented learning styles. Expanding the availability of English-taught courses can also support students who are not yet proficient in Chinese.

Furthermore, universities should establish academic counseling centers staffed by individuals familiar with African cultures and languages. These centers can assist students with course selection, academic planning, and study strategies, providing more culturally responsive academic support.

### 4.3 Psychological Support and Peer Networks

Tailored mental health services are crucial for the psychological well-being of African students. Universities should hire culturally competent counselors who understand African social norms, values, and emotional expressions to provide targeted mental health support.

Additionally, peer mentorship programs should be introduced as part of student orientation. These can pair new African students with senior international students from similar backgrounds or with trained Chinese peer mentors. Mentors can help newcomers navigate campus life, including the use of local apps, dining options, and social customs, thereby reducing initial culture shock and feelings of isolation.

Universities should also create inclusive social platforms that encourage broader participation by African students in student clubs and campus activities. Co-hosted events and intercultural dialogue forums can foster friendships and facilitate integration. Establishing an international student union that regularly organizes networking activities would provide African students with a meaningful space to engage with both Chinese and international peers.

### 4.4 Policy Optimization Recommendations

To improve institutional responsiveness, universities and government agencies should provide intercultural competency training for administrative staff, faculty members, and Chinese students. These sessions should focus on African cultural norms, values, and student expectations to enhance cross-cultural communication and support.

In addition, feedback mechanisms should be implemented to monitor and improve the quality of services provided to international students. These may include regular surveys, suggestion boxes, or open forums. Feedback from African students regarding their academic experiences, daily life, and psychological adjustment should be systematically collected and analyzed. The insights gained should inform continuous policy refinement and service improvement.

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