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Cultural Adaptation in International Education: A Case Study of Chinese Teachers in the Arab World

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Abstract

With development of Chinese language education in the Arab world, the number of Chinese teachers in Arab countries is growing. While cultural adaptation is a premise of an overseas assignment, the gap between cultures makes intercultural adaptation hard and causes a cultural adjustment disorder. This study revealed intercultural barriers of Chinese teachers in the Arab world and offered adaptive strategies. By qualitative research and first-hand data analysis, five topics under intercultural barriers were summed up : tropical desert climate, daily life challenges, conflictions between educational concepts, Arab-Islamic socioculture, and reentry adaptation. Counter-measures to intercultural barriers were proposed: Local administrators in Arab countries should strengthen social support for overseas teachers by creating diverse organizational culture and a sense of belonging. Colleges in China should design and execute more Arab-targeted training scheme which covers stages of pre-service, in-service as well as post-service. Chinese teachers should form reasonable psychological expectations by learning the Arab world's national conditions and culture before departure.

Keywords: Chinese teachers, Arab countries,cultural adaptation, intercultural barriers, adaptation tactics,

Introduction

The Arab world refers to countries distributed in west Asia and north Africa, wherein Arabic and Islam are common language and religion. The Arab world includes twenty-two(22) countries such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Algeria, Egypt. Time-honored friendship between China and the Arab world is shared. In recent years, China's Belt and Road Initiative echoed with the Looking Eastward Policy in the Arab world and all twenty-two(22) Arab countries signed documents on Belt and Road Cooperation.

Cultural and educational exchanges are important parts of Sino-Arab cooperation. With the inclusion of Chinese language in the national education systems of the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, the number of Chinese teachers in the Arab world is growing rapidly. However, the unique natural and sociocultural environment, religious atmosphere, nationality structure, and educational system make it difficult to adapt to Arab cultures. Moreover, lack of knowledge and stereotypes about the Arab world among Chinese teachers intensified problems of cultural adaptation. In order to guarantee the success of teaching and intercultural communication, Chinese teachers have to make more endeavors to adapt to new environment emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively. It is necessary to investigate the Chinese teachers' cultural adaptation in the Arab world, and it is reasonable to consider Chinese teachers in the Arab world as a whole due to parallel political system and sociocultural characteristics in different Arab countries.

1. Research Design

Considerable evidence has been showing that cultural adaptation is vital for expatriate job (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Black & Mendenhall, 1990) or intercultural experiences (Sam & Berry, 2010), and cultural adaptation is closely related with cultural distance (Ward & Chang, 1997), social support (Berry, 2006), acquired knowledge and skills (Pacheco, 2020), personality trait of sojourners (Ward et al., 2004), psychological expectations (Geeraert et al., 2015), personal identity (Peltokorpi & Zhang, 2020). These studies provide references on the content, structure, influence factors and main tactics of cultural adaptation to the present study. However, the object of these researches is mainly the international students and the Arab cultural scene; Chinese teachers and cultural adaptation studies in the Arab world are relatively rare. Therfore, the purpose of the study is to dig deep in practical problems and solutions during the intercultural experience of Chinese teachers in the Arab world.

By combining relevant definitions of cultural adaptation and international Chinese educational practice, the cultural adaptation of overseas Chinese teachers can be defined as a process of self-adjustment and interpersonal interaction, through which the integration to a new environment, the physical and mental comfort would be achieved. The self-adjustment of teachers may be negative leading to stress, or positive leading to self-actualization. For Chinese teachers, their adaptation is especially related to the effectiveness of language teaching and professional development. Because of the dynamics, chronicity, and contextualization of the cultural adaptation, qualitative design, which aims at the diverse and hazy situation, is suitable to this study. The following methods were employed as data collection and analysis.

1.1.Fieldwork and Ethnography

A qualitative design stresses the researcher's participation in real life by experiencing the thinking mode of the observed individual and collecting first-hand materials; contextualized and intersubjective explanation can be achieved. The two authors of this study both have over six years of work experience in Arab countries. They have undergone a complete cross-cultural adaptation process. Part of their cross-cultural work involves conducting pre-job training for novice teachers and maintaining the foreign relations of Chinese educational institutions. The authors' experiences, their records and reflections on cultural adaptation made it possible to reveal some reality of teachers' working in the Arab world from emic and etic standpoint.

1.2.Qualitative Interviews

The interview outline was designed before sampling, it consisted of three main topics: teachers' background information which includes demographics, working country and its duration and the present working situation, cultural adaptation problems such as difficulties at work and communication and the coping strategies that teachers applied in the face of intercultural barriers. Using stratified purposive sampling, twenty-five (25) interviewees were selected,and each interview lasted between 40 and 75 minutes. Table 1 shows the basic information of the sampling, the interview participants comprised Chinese language teachers based in Sudan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco. Out of consideration for their privacy, this study identifies them using codes consisting of the letters S, U, E, A, M (denoting their country) plus a numerical identifier. The country distribution in the table fits the division of subcultures of Arab world: the Fertile Crescent, Egypt, Western Arab World, African Arab World, and Arabian Peninsula (Mazen, 1991). This study covered all these subcultures except the Fertile Crescent (actually, authoritative Chinese teaching is yet to be established in countries at this region such as Palestine, Syria, Iraq).

Table 1: Basic information of the sampling (N=25)

Country distributions	Sudan: 8 (32%)	UAE: 7 (28%)	Egypt: 6 (24%)	Saudi Arabia: 2 (8%)	Morocco: 2 (8%)
Interviewees' coding and gender	Male: S1, S2; Female: S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8	Male: U1; Female: U2, U3, U4, U5, U6, U7	Male: E1; Female: E2, E3, E4, E5, E6	Male: A1; Female: A2	Female: M1, M2
Duration in Arab country	0-1 year: 12 (48%); 1-2 years: 7 (28%); 2-3 years: 3 (12%); 3 years above: 3 (12%)				
Age distributions	24-29 years old: 16 (64%); 30-35 years old: 6 (24%); 36-41 years old: 2 (8%); 42 years old and above: 1 (4%)				
Working organizations	Confucious Institutes: 15 (60%); Local universities: 3 (12%); Local primary and middle schools: 7 (28%)				
Religious belief	Islam: S1, S3, A2; Others are nullifidians				

In order to form a sound semantic concept set which offers explanatory power to phenomena in the study, grounded theory was used to analyse interview texts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The concrete analyses are: 1) transcription of interview and field records; 2)

coding of interview text and progressive classification on generics.Five (5) themes were summarized, and they contributed to the main adaptation barriers of Chinese teachers; 3) A comparison between five(5) themes and other materials, focusing on the Arabic features and solutions to the problems. The effective tactics of adaptation practiced by teachers provided references to the "countermeasures to intercultural barriers of Chinese teachers in Arab countries" part in this study.

2. Main Cultural Adaptation Barriers of Chinese Teachers in Arab World

The cultural adaptation barriers are manifested as different dimensions such as the psychological and sociocultural adaptations by Searle and Ward (1990), the general adaptation, work adaptation, and interaction adaptation by Black et al. (1991). But these popular dimensions lack attention to the Arab culture and the Chinese educational context. This study takes the existing dimensions as reference and sets its own dimensions according to the reality faced by Chinese teachers in the Arab world.

2.1.Conformation: Adaptation to Tropical Desert Climate

More than half of the teachers expressed their deep impression on local climate, especially when teachers lived Arab and non-Arab experiences. Teacher S4 worked in Sudan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia respectively, she compared three working experiences and noted the challenges brought by climate in Arab countries: "*weather in Sudan was most challenging, I felt thirsty outdoors even after I drank water. To some extent, the severe heat prompted me to leave.*" T1 worked in Saudi Arabia and signed: "*It rained this February, but just drizzling. Next rain will be in next year.*" Some physiologically sensitive teachers found more expenditure in Arab world, and an article published in Journal of *Confucious Institute* recorded a teacher's personal observation that "*we don't need water heater at all here.*"

Situated within low-latitude zones and intersected by the Equator, the Arab world encompasses three major arid expanses: the Sahara, the Arabian, and the Libyan deserts.The tropical desert climate prevails and contrasts with the Chinese one, this contributed to the outstanding adaptation problems for teachers in the Arab world. In the face of nature, Chinese teachers have no choice but to conform to it. Many teachers mentioned a Chinese idiom "*Shun Qi Ziran*" which means let nature takes its course when talking about their coping tactics. In this Chinese idiom, the word *Ziran* has two meanings: the nature and let it be. Chinese people use this idiom to show a kind of optimism and resignation, teacher A2 mentioned this idiom and said: "*I always streaming with sweat, but it's good, the toxicant of my body could be detoxed. I can coexist with the climate problems.*"

2.2.Adjustment to Arab Cultural Schema: The Search for a Foothold and Adaptation to Daily Life

The Arab world possesses unique social and cultural customs such as Islamic rituals, greeting manners, festival activities and gender differences in communication. These customs form the Arab cultural schema which requires all citizens to comply.Upon their arrival to the Arab world, Chinese teachers felt much acculturation pressure especially when they were seeking their foothold. As E5 mentioned: "*My urgent matters were basic necessities of life in*

the initial stage, I felt like local customs were restrictions, I had to survive rather than live in it."

Among Arab countries, the economic gap exists between west Asia and north Africa. Many Chinese teachers lacked knowledge about the Arab world and could not differentiate between the Arab countries and the African ones. This caused various daily life barriers. Generally speaking, teachers in west Asia (Saudi Arabia and UAE in this study) reported more issues about culture shock which is based on information gap or solemn religious atmosphere, and teachers in north Africa (Egypt, Sudan, and Morocco in this study) reported more issues about life inconvenience which is based on relatively weak material condition. Table 2 shows the comparison between adaptation barriers in west Asia and north Africa.

Table 2: The comparison of two kinds of adaptation barriers

Region/Country		Adaptation Barriers	Barriers Orientation
West Asia	UAE	U1: *many formalities, I don't know how and where to do them. But without these formalities, there will be no water and electricity.*	Culture shock due to information gap and religion
	Saudi Arabia	A2: *I am a Muslim, and there is no need for me to wear a black Burqa when going out in China. But as a teacher here, I have to wear it and be model of rules. And as my guardian, my husband has to come to Saudi Arabia too.*	
North Africa	Egypt	E3: *buses here are kind of shabby, and there is no station board, no voice announcement for stops. I feel insecure in transportation.*	Life inconvenience due to material condition
	Sudan	S1: *my room experienced water leaking for monthes, I had to clean the room.* S6: *outage of petroleum and electricity is frequent, they are basics of life, life stopped without them.*	
	Morocco	M2: *I was assigned to teach in a remote town, no wifi there and mobile data plans were limited. I have to be meticulous in planning even when watching movies and chatting with my family members in China.*	

Thanks to their majors, most teachers knew that there are stages of cultural adaptation such as the honeymoon and culture shock periods. But, some teachers expressed that the "honeymoon" disappeared unexpectedly.The reason is the high gap between their psychological expectation and survival problems; indeed, the pressing adaptation problems triggered psychological feelings of shock. However, these barriers got revolved as time goes on.For example, as soon as the housing problem was arranged, teachers expressed a sense of stability and relaxation. Teachers, who stayed in an Arab country for more than eighteen (18) months, managed daily issues effectively and expressed a sense of personal or professional growth.

2.3 Task Orientation: Adaptation to Discrepancy of Educational Concepts

According to cultural dimension theory by Hofstede (1983), Arab culture shows low Index of Uncertainty Avoidance. Arabs believe in destiny and are optimistic to life, which is different from the Chinese culture whose Uncertainty Adoidance Idex is high. Chinese teachers deployed to Arab countries typically undertake their assignments with clearly defined tasks. Driven by the pursuit of certainty, their cross-cultural adaptation becomes strongly work-centered. This focus makes work-related adaptation challenges a prominent barrier, most notably evident in conflicts between Chinese and Arab educational philosophies.

Chinese teachers in the Arab world bear some identities: volunteer, Chinese culture carrier,

and/or spokesman of Chinese image. When their educational concepts became difficult to apply in local teaching, conflicts occurred. Their work responsibility elevated the sensitivity to Arab educational concepts. For example, Chinese teachers believe Arab teachers should join them to dance and roll with kids, just like what teachers do in China. But they may find that Arab teachers are not accustomed to doing this. On the other hand, many Chinese teachers used to "con trol" the classroom, a fact that may be queried by Arab teachers.

With regard to religious education, its proportion is high in the middle and secondary schools of many Arab countries, and religious ideas and customs are deep-rooted among Arab students. For example, students may ask for leave to pray.Moreover, entertainment is not encouraged in and out of the school. However, the middle school students have strong inner curiosity, desire for novelty and the unknown. When Chinese teachers, whose skin color, complexion, and behavior are out of ordinary,walk into the classrooms, middle school students may got stirred:

> The little girls saw me, maybe it was the first time for them seeing a female teacher like me, they rushed to me and hugging, touching my hair by turns. It's time for the class, but my hair still in their hands. (from interviewee S7) First and foremost, you have to manage the class, every thing will be in vain without discipline. (from interviewee U3)

Besides the religious elements, Chinese teachers must adapt to local educational system. Influenced by western educational systems, some schools adopted board of directors system that grant parents greater voice. Chinese teachers who are not familiar with these practice and concept may be labelled as unbefitting and accused by local parents. Chinese teachers may feel "wronged for the unfair treatment of their good intentions" and their "conscientious practice" in education

2.4 Integration: Adaptation to Socioculture in the Arab World

Sociocultural adaptation is the capacity to adapt to new sociocultural environments. Unlike the uniqueness of adaptation to severe climate, daily life problems, and Arab education, socioculture adaptation is universal and exists in almost all intercultural experiences. Interviewee M2 travelled in Europe and witnessed many European tourists, She compared life paces of European, Arabian, and Chinese:

> Arabs, Europeans, and Chinese have completely different paces of life. Overall, the pace of life in China is the fastest. Initially, I found it difficult to adapt to the Arab pace of life, but gradually, I began to appreciate their optimistic and relaxed attitude towards life. (from interviewee M2)

In fact, Arab and Chinese cultures are similar to some extent.Both of them strongly emphasize not only on collectivism/family but also on status in the interpersonal relationships, which manifests as a hierarchical pattern in social interactions. As a result, individuals from these two cultural backgrounds maintain certain identity boundaries during interactions, making it difficult for some Chinese teachers to truly integrate into the local community. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and alienation. However, Muslim teachers show more comprehension of the Arab socioculture, especially local religion and interaction. For example, Muslim teachers have a more tolerant understanding of the locals' sense of time and pace of life:

> Some things are just Arabia's habits and not always about religion. Muslim believes it is good to worship punctually, Allah gives no happiness to those who don't pray on time, and it strengthens a sense of time. So slow pace of Arabian is caused by the surrounding environment, they just get used to it and enjoys their life. If one behaves hastily, he or she will be rejected by surroundings. (from interviewee S3)

2.5 A Neglected Problem: Adaptation of Repatriation

According to the W-curve hypothesis of intercultural adaptation, when the sojourner experienced the U-curve of adaptation overseas, adaptation problems recur after they returned home (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). Some teachers in this study finished duration or returned home, almost each one reflected problems of repatriation back in China, some of them even said that repatriation is their real problem:

> I found it's hard to adapt to domestic life, I feel life in China is too fast, too busy, and too competitive. I felt like this especially when I come back at first, when I saw everybody was bowing to watch mobile phones, when I appeared to be an alien. (from interviewee S2)

Problems about repatriation and psychological belonging can be revealed in most of the interviews. But little attention is paid to repatriation of overseas Chinese teachers.For teachers who had a Master degree of Chinese Language for International Education, few of them are willing to teach abroad. For teachers who gained intercultural teaching experiences, they ran off in the face of repatriation adaptation problems. This caused a waste of manpower resource. Consequently, in order to build a healthy teaching body, a study on repatriation adaptation needs to be reinforced.

3. Countermeasures to Intercultural Barriers of Chinese Teachers in the Arab Countries

The following possible strategies that can be applied by the administrators, training and selection organizations and by Chinese teachers themselves can be highlighted in order to improve the adaptation and multicultural awareness of Chinese teachers:

3.1.Administrators' Strategies in the Arab world

Impressed by collectivism and working orientation, the stance of adaptation for Chinese teachers in the Arab world is harmonious colleagues' relationships and teacher-student relationships as well as the improvement of working efficiency. That is why organizations like Confucious Institutes and Chinese departments in the Arab countries need to create an organizational culture which is diverse, inclusive, belonging and supportive.

Researches on intercultural adaptation proved that the social support promotes adaptation significantly. It is necessary for local administrators to build social support networks for teachers. Indeed, support from compatriots brings about psychological well-being, and support from host countries helps to reduce uncertainty in an exotic culture. Furthermore, material support, information support and emotional support play different roles in intercultural adaptation.

3.2.Training and Selection Organizations' Strategies in China

Adaptation barriers run through all stages: pre-work, tenure abroad, and repatriation. The training and selection organizations in China focus on pre-work stage such as the language curriculum and an intensified training. Intercultural ability in situational contexts is somehow neglected. Take intensified training for pre-work teachers in recent years for example, some steps like the combination of trial lectures and peer evaluations was repeated during the

university study, and some cultural elements, such as the tea ceremony performance or Taijiquan practice, are not practical for intercultural daily life. Therefore, other training courses could be added, such as Arabic daily expression, life tips abroad, sociocultural features of the Arab world, religious values and taboos, stress coping and psychological adjustment skills.

In addition, more can be done for tenure abroad and repatriation. Some teachers abroad noted that they did not know where to consult when non-work problems happened; others complained about not being informed about the turnover of domestic program executives.this situation impeded the mutual communication between abroad and home. Though many repatriation problems are caused by the lack of post-tenure guarantee, little attention was paid to the employment, living conditions, disposition after graduation, teachers'psychological and familial issues abroad.

3.3. Chinese Teachers' Strategies

It is essential for Chinese teachers to know the situation and culture of the target country in advance so as to prepare the material and acquire the skills necessary for an intercultural environment besides setting reasonable psychological expectations. When a culture shock happens, teachers should view it positively and respect the religion and customs of the Arab countries. Scholars believe that an intercultural adaptation is a process of pressure-coping, the pressure is not always negative, an individual grows in the process of pressure-coping (Kim, 2008).Teachers should also enhance their intercultural competence and sensitivity toward various cultural frameworks.As Bennett (1993) pointed out, the intercultural sensitivity is a key for the transformation from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. So, the intercultural sensitivity paves the way to a balanced view of Sino-Arab cultural differences and builds up a sense of belonging in the Arab cultures.

Conclusion

Chinese education in the Arab world is still in its entrepreneurial stage despite the Chinese language popularity in recent years. By fieldwork, ethnography and interviews, this study collected adaptation materials from teachers in five Arab countries distributed in west Asia and north Africa. Five dimensions of adaptation barriers were summarized: conformation to tropical desert climate, adaptation to daily life, adaptation to discrepancy of educational concepts, integration to Arab socioculture, and adaptation of repatriation. Form the perspective of stakeholders, solutions to problems were provided. This study highlights a critical scarcity of research specifically focused on Chinese teachers' experiences in diverse Arab contexts and points to urgent future directions. While providing a foundational understanding, the complex and evolving nature of cross-cultural adaptation demands more detailed, embedded, and longitudinal scholarship.

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