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Review of the Intercultural Academic and Social Challenges among Chinese International Students in Malaysia

Manjet Kaur Mehar Singh
orcid.org/0000-0002-7805-4215

Wenou Xue

*School of Languages, Literacies & Translation
Universiti Sains Malaysia*

ABSTRACT: *International education is a current phenomenon characterized by an influx of international students from multiple countries into Malaysian universities. The highest number of international students at Malaysian universities is from China. The growth in the number of international students has led to an increasing diversity of cultural practices in the learning context, which requires intercultural adaptability. This review focused on the intercultural academic and social challenges faced by Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions. Peer-reviewed articles published on Scopus, Taylor & Francis, EBSCO Host, Web of Science, Springer, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Wiley Online platforms over 10 years (2015-2025) were used for data collection. The Model of Intercultural Competence guided the review. The insights from the review offer opportunities for relevant stakeholders to create a framework that improves intercultural adaptability and sustainability among international students, specifically Chinese international students.*

Keywords: Chinese international students, intercultural academic challenges, intercultural adaptability, intercultural social challenges, international education, Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, international students, especially those from China, constitute one of the largest groups of students. The increasing number of international students studying in Malaysia has led to linguistic, educational, and cultural diversity (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Multiple diversities crucially impact the challenges related to intercultural adaptability when international students from China further their studies at Malaysian higher education institutions. Cultural dislocation, identity crises, and sociocultural issues are faced by every international student regardless of the country in which they are studying. In the context of China's students in Malaysia's multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual higher education institutions, whether public or private, low English language proficiency is a barrier to students' academic empowerment and social interaction. Intercultural interactions between international students from China and other students (both international and multilingual Malaysians) for educational and social purposes require negotiations that are influenced by various social and cultural factors impacting communication among these students. These cultural and social issues can transform into becoming intercultural challenges if students are unable to negotiate their communication differences. In such a context, there is a need to investigate the intercultural academic and social challenges faced by these students. Currently, most studies, as discussed below, are focused on students from China in Anglophone countries. Therefore, this research explored the intercultural academic and social challenges faced by international students from China in Malaysia. The study is guided by the following research question: To what extent do intercultural academic and intercultural social challenges impact intercultural adaptability?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia is increasingly recognized as an emerging education hub in Asia (Singh & Jack, 2022), with notable growth in the number of international students choosing to study in the country. According to the Education Malaysia Global Service (EMGS, 2024), the top 5 countries with the highest number of applications are China, Bangladesh, Indonesia, India, and Pakistan. Chinese international students constitute the largest group of international students in Malaysia, with 33,216 applications in 2024, an increase of 24.7% from 2023, whereas Bangladeshi students represent the second-largest group, with 6,917 applications.

International students frequently confront a range of challenges while studying abroad, including academic difficulties and complex cultural adaptations. These challenges involve communication with lecturers, fellow students, and university staff, as well as managing the tension between preserving their cultural identity and adapting to the norms and expectations of the host society (Wu et al., 2015). While academic and sociocultural adaptations have been widely examined in the literature (Brisset et al., 2010; Yu, Mak & Bodycott, 2019), existing studies are largely concentrated in Western contexts, leaving a

critical gap in understanding how these experiences are uniquely manifested in non-Western settings such as Malaysia (Xue & Manjet, 2025). As Malaysia continues to attract an increasing number of students from mainland China, more attention is needed to understand the specific challenges these students face in adapting to local academic and sociocultural environments.

In the academic realm, Chinese students, although often stereotyped as diligent, disciplined, and academically driven, frequently struggle to adapt to the educational culture of the host country (Gebru & Yuksel-Kaptanoglu, 2020; Wang & Mireles-Rios, 2025). These challenges arise from language barriers and fundamental differences in pedagogical norms and epistemological assumptions between the Chinese and Malaysian education systems. The Chinese system emphasizes teacher-centered instruction, rote memorization, and hierarchical classroom structures, where authority is seldom challenged and student participation is limited (Min, 2016). Confucian values such as deference to authority, fear of losing face, and avoidance of confrontation further restrict classroom interaction and critical discussion (Cai et al., 2024). When entering a Malaysian university, where active participation, peer cooperation, and critical thinking are expected, Chinese students may be caught off guard and culturally restricted.

Moreover, linguistic challenges compound these adaptation issues. Chinese students often struggle to understand academic terminology, lectures, local accents, and idiomatic expressions. Speaking anxiety, fear of embarrassment, and limited vocabulary hinder their willingness to engage in discussions, group projects, and peer interactions (Zhai & Razali, 2022; Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Additionally, many have only received exam-focused English instruction geared toward standardized tests such as IELTS or TOEFL, which poorly prepares them for the expectations of academic writing and argumentation in Malaysian universities (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). The combination of pedagogical dissonance, language proficiency, and underdeveloped critical thinking skills results in diminished academic performance, low self-confidence, and a reluctance to seek academic support, ultimately limiting the depth and breadth of their learning experience.

Sociocultural adaptation, closely intertwined with academic engagement, constitutes another critical area of concern. Chinese students frequently experience a sense of cultural dislocation and social alienation upon entering the host culture (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). This transition is usually accompanied by culture shock due to unfamiliar social norms, interpersonal communication styles, and institutional expectations (Yang & Du, 2025). Language remains a key barrier, not only in academic settings but also in everyday social interactions, restricting their ability to form friendships with local students and engage confidently in cross-cultural dialog (Briscoe et al., 2021).

The Malaysian sociocultural context introduces additional layers of complexity. As a multiethnic and religious society with Islam as the official religion, Malaysia presents Chinese students with novel religious practices and social customs that may be unfamiliar or difficult to interpret. Elements such as prayer routines, gender norms, dietary laws, and modest dress expectations may

not only appear foreign but also become points of confusion or discomfort if institutional orientation and support mechanisms are lacking (Shafaei & Razak, 2016). Additionally, several studies have highlighted the perception among Chinese students that Malaysian students tend to form tight-knit ethnic or religious groups, which may reinforce feelings of exclusion and marginalization (Singh & Jack, 2022; Singh, 2018). This perceived social inaccessibility can severely limit opportunities for intercultural exchange, friendship formation, and a sense of belonging, which are key factors in successful sociocultural integration.

Existing studies highlight significant barriers stemming from pedagogical mismatches, language difficulties, and cultural dissonance. However, the academic and lived experiences of Chinese students remain insufficiently explored within current educational discourse, particularly in comparison to the volume of research on students in Anglophone countries. This gap in knowledge underscores the need for a more context-sensitive and critically engaged understanding of the adaptation challenges that Chinese international students encounter in Malaysian higher education. A systematic literature review provides a valuable methodology for consolidating existing findings, identifying thematic and methodological trends, and highlighting under-researched areas (Soaita, 2020). Accordingly, this review synthesizes empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025, focusing on the academic and sociocultural adaptation of Chinese international students in Malaysian tertiary institutions. By identifying prevailing patterns and overlooked dimensions, this review aims to inform future research, policy, and pedagogical strategies that better support the intercultural adaptability of Chinese international students in this increasingly global yet culturally distinct academic landscape.

METHOD

Systematic evaluation integrates empirical evidence from all individuals who meet predefined eligibility criteria, adopting a straightforward and systematic approach to answering specific research questions (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). A rigorous and systematic search strategy was employed, combining electronic database searches with manual screening to ensure comprehensive coverage of the relevant literature. The electronic search primarily utilized high-impact academic databases, including Web of Science, EBSCOhost, PubMed, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, Scopus, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected for their broad disciplinary reach and their indexing of reputable, peer-reviewed journals in the fields of education and intercultural studies. To mitigate potential database bias and indexing limitations, manual searches were conducted by cross-referencing the bibliographies of seminal empirical studies and prior systematic reviews.

Searle and Ward's (1990) observation that the constructs of "adaptation," "adjustment," and "acculturation" are often used interchangeably in cross-cultural research prompted the search strategy to intentionally incorporate a wide array of synonymous and related terms. Keywords included Chinese students, Chinese international students, cross-cultural adaptation, cross-cultural adjustment,

acculturation, intercultural, academic adaptation, academic adjustment, sociocultural adaptation, sociocultural adjustment, and Malaysian higher education. This expansive keyword set aimed to capture the complex, multidimensional, and evolving conceptualizations of intercultural competence, which is consistent with Deardorff's (2006) Model of Intercultural Competence.

The inclusion criteria focused on empirical studies published in English between 2015 and 2025, aligning the review with contemporary trends and developments in the international education landscape. By employing a dual search approach and theoretically informed keyword selection, this review sought to ensure methodological transparency, minimize publication bias, and provide a critical synthesis of the most relevant and recent scholarship (see Table 1).

Table 1: Keywords for Article Retrieval

Database	Search Keywords
Google Scholar	In-title: "Chinese international students" or "Chinese students" AND ("cross-cultural adaptation" OR "acculturation" OR "intercultural") AND ("academic adaptation" OR "academic adjustment" OR "sociocultural adaptation" OR "sociocultural adjustment") AND ("Malaysia" OR "in Malaysia" OR "Malaysian higher education")
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY("Chinese students" OR "Chinese international students") AND ("cross-cultural adaptation" OR "cross-cultural adjustment" OR "acculturation" OR "intercultural") AND ("academic adaptation" OR "academic adjustment") OR ("sociocultural adaptation" OR "sociocultural adjustment") AND (Malaysia OR "Malaysian higher education")
EBSCO/PubMed/Springer/Taylor & Francis/Wiley Online	("Chinese students" OR "Chinese international students") AND ("cross-cultural adaptation" OR "cross-cultural adjustment" OR "acculturation" OR "intercultural") AND ("academic adaptation" OR "academic adjustment" OR "sociocultural adaptation" OR "sociocultural adjustment") AND (Malaysia OR "Malaysian higher education")

Web of Science ((ALL=("Chinese students" OR "Chinese international students")) AND ALL=("cross-cultural adaptation" OR "cross-cultural adjustment" OR acculturation OR intercultural)) AND ALL=("academic adaptation" OR "academic adjustment" OR "sociocultural adaptation" OR "sociocultural adjustment")) AND ALL=(Malaysia OR "Malaysian higher education")

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: (1) articles published in English; (2) articles published between 2015 and 2025; (3) investigations of academic and sociocultural adaptation; and (4) studies in Malaysia with a sample of international students from China.

The exclusion criteria for this study were as follows: (1) articles published before 2015; (2) review papers, discussion papers, autobiographies, preprints, government policy documents, and conference proceedings; (3) off-topic studies; and (4) studies not conducted in Malaysia.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeline	2015-2025 (April)	<2015
Literature Type	Research paper	Review paper, discussion papers, autobiographies, preprints, government policy papers, and conference proceedings
Language	English	Non-English
Research Site	Malaysia	Non-Malaysia
Research Object	Chinese students	Non-Chinese students

Data Abstraction Procedure and Methodological Quality Assessment

Following the initial search using the selected keywords, a total of 230 articles were retrieved from major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, EBSCOhost, PubMed, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, and Web of Science. and related sources. After removing duplicates and irrelevant studies through manual screening, 207 unique articles remained. Applying the publication date filter to exclude studies published before

2015 resulted in the removal of 69 articles. A more rigorous manual screening was subsequently conducted to exclude studies outside the Malaysian context, non-empirical publications (such as commentaries and reviews), and research not involving Chinese international students. This process yielded 32 articles for full-text review. After these articles were critically assessed against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 20 empirical studies were ultimately selected for the systematic review. The article selection process is summarized in Figure 1, and the characteristics of the final included studies are detailed in Figure 2.

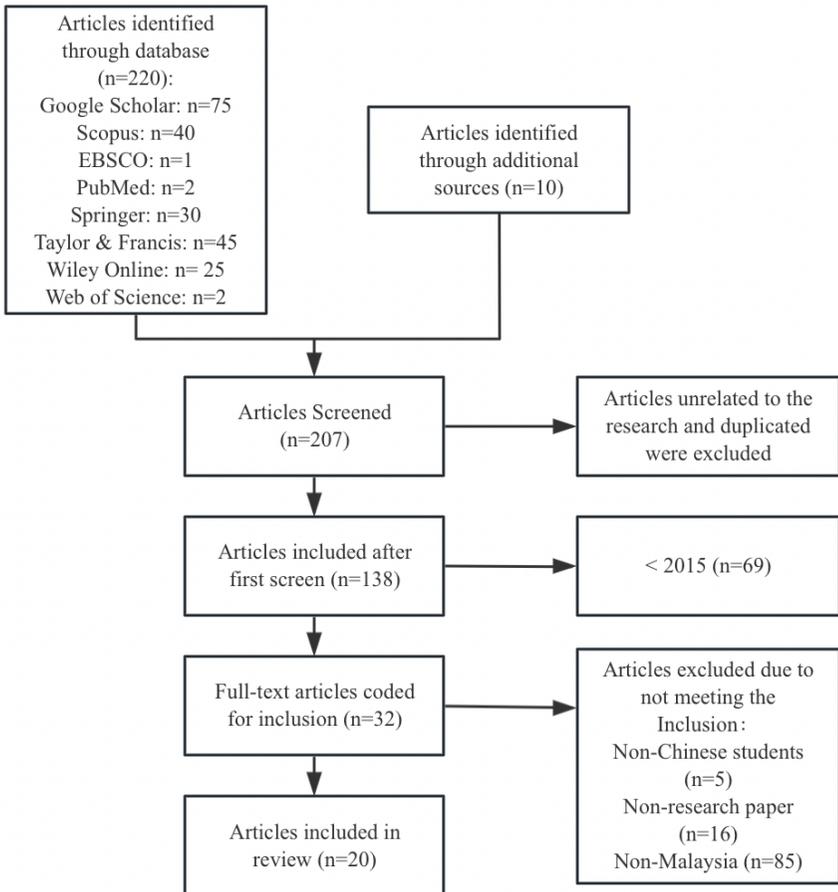


Figure 1: Flow diagram of the process of article selection

A comprehensive flowchart was developed to synthesize the similarities across 20 studies on the adaptation challenges encountered by Chinese students in Malaysia. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the data analysis involved five phases involving familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finally producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The core feature of the qualitative data analysis of this research was coding. The coding of the data was performed via thematic analysis, a qualitative analytic method explained by Braun & Clarke (2006) as identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The themes that captured the relevant data from the reviewed articles to answer the research question and represent the patterned responses within the dataset were created. It highlights common areas of research focus, theoretical frameworks, research designs, data collection methods, and key findings. The flowchart provides a clear and concise visual summary of the shared patterns and themes in the literature. The specific details of the 20 articles are presented in Table 3.

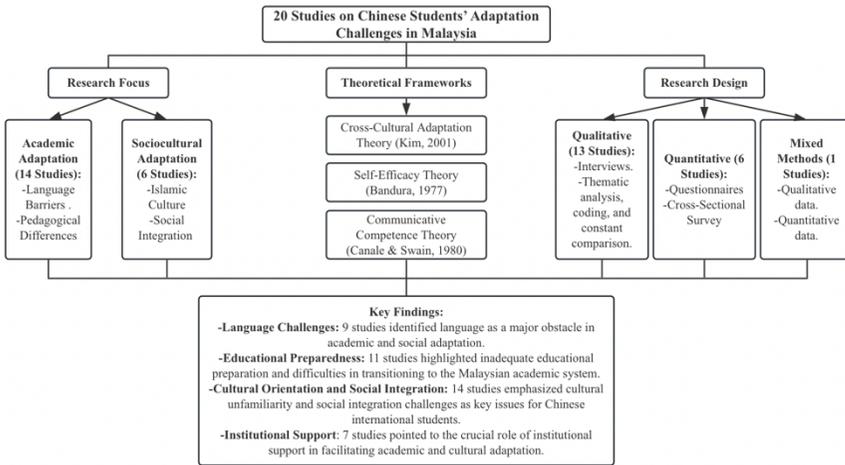


Figure 2: Synthesis of Commonalities in 20 Studies

RESULTS

The reviewed studies covered diverse samples of Chinese international students enrolled at various Malaysian higher education institutions, with a clear predominance of public universities. Some studies (e.g., Zhai & Razali, 2022a; Zhang & Hasim, 2023; Bi & Ahmad, 2024) have focused on Chinese students, which is consistent with the scope of this review, whereas others have included them in a broader group of international students (e.g., Chan et al., 2021; En et al., 2024). While useful in providing insights into the prevailing adaptation

challenges, this broader perspective may inadvertently obscure the unique experiences of Chinese students.

Sample sizes ranged from small-scale qualitative inquiries involving five or six participants (e.g., Fei et al., 2023; Hor & Jusoh, 2021) to large-scale surveys involving more than 400 respondents (e.g., En et al., 2024). Despite this diversity, many qualitative studies fail to provide sufficient demographic details regarding participants' academic fields, duration of stay, or prior overseas experience. These variables are arguably central to interpreting students' adaptation experiences but are frequently overlooked.

Private institutions were markedly underrepresented, with only a few studies examining students outside the public university system (e.g., Abd & Ahmad, 2023). Additionally, inconsistencies in reporting sampling strategies were typical. Many studies failed to explain how participants were selected, raising concerns about representativeness and limiting the generalizability of findings. This underlines the need for broader and more transparent sampling across diverse institutional types and student profiles. Table 3 presents the sample and study locations.

Table 3: Sample characteristics and study locations

Sample	Location	Articles
Chinese students	Five public universities	Bi & Ahmad (2024), Zhang & Hasim (2023).
	Three universities	Tuerxun et al. (2020).
	A public university	Hor & Jusoh (2021), Shi et al. (2019), Yakin & Totu (2018), Zhai & Razali (2022a), Zhai & Razali (2022b), Zhao et al. (2022).
	A private university	Fei et al. (2023).
	N/A	Yue et al. (2024),

Zhang & Wahab (2022).

Chinese students	Five public universities	Chan et al. (2021),
as one of the		En et al. (2024).
samples	A public university	Huiling & Ismail (2022),
		Singh (2018),
		Singh & Jack (2022).
	Private universities	Abd & Ahmad (2023).
	A higher education institution	Wong & Liu (2024).
	N/A	Xie et al. (2023).

Topic in Focus

Academic and sociocultural adaptation are two closely interrelated areas that dominate the focus of existing research. Among them, academic adaptation has received the most sustained scholarly attention. Commonly reported challenges include limited English proficiency, unfamiliar instructional methods, and difficulties in academic interactions with lecturers and supervisors (Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Zhai & Razali, 2022a). In English–medium instruction (EMI) postgraduate programs, students are required not only to master specialized academic content in English but also to navigate linguistic diversity in academic and administrative settings, including exposure to local English varieties and the occasional use of Malay (Huiling & Ismail, 2022). These linguistic demands posed distinct challenges in the Malaysian context, differing from those encountered in more linguistically homogeneous English-speaking countries.

Sociocultural adaptation challenges primarily revolve around difficulties establishing meaningful intercultural relationships, especially with Malay, Indian, and other international peers (Shi et al., 2019; Wong & Liu, 2024). Although Malaysia’s multicultural environment is often positioned as an intercultural advantage, students unfamiliar with Islamic practices or local norms encounter unforeseen difficulties. Tuerxun et al. (2020), for example, reported discomfort arising from dietary restrictions, prayer norms, and dress codes. In addition, environmental factors such as the tropical climate of Malaysia are cited as sources of discomfort.

Influencing Factors

A critical synthesis of the 20 selected studies indicates that four interrelated factors, namely, English language proficiency, cultural orientation, educational preparedness, and institutional support, significantly influence the academic and sociocultural adaptation of Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions. These challenges are shaped by Malaysia's distinctive, multilingual, multicultural, and religiously diverse environment.

English Language Proficiency in a Multilingual Context

English proficiency, particularly in academic contexts, has emerged as the most persistent and multifaceted barrier. Students with limited English proficiency struggle with comprehension and classroom participation, often expressing their thoughts with clarity and confidence (Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Singh & Jack, 2022). While language difficulties are common among international students globally, the Malaysian context presents additional complexity. In some cases, code-switching between English and Malay in the classroom has confused (Huiling & Ismail, 2022).

Chinese students reported difficulties understanding lectures, informal interactions, and humor due to unfamiliar accents and local expressions (Hor & Jusoh, 2021; Zhai & Razali, 2022). This linguistic hybridity, which is common in Malaysian English as a medium of instruction (EMI) institutions, creates a unique communicative setting in which international students often find it confusing and difficult to navigate, and they confront difficulties in expressing themselves during discussions, presentations, and writing tasks, which contributes to reduced participation, increased anxiety, and lower academic performance.

Education Preparedness and Academic Transition

The transition from China's exam-oriented education system to Malaysia's student-centered academic environment poses considerable difficulties. Chinese international students come from exam-driven English education systems in China focused on grammar, vocabulary, and standardized test preparation, which do not adequately prepare them for the academic language demands of postgraduate study in EMI contexts (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Consequently, students encountered challenges in developing coherent arguments, using discipline-specific vocabulary, identifying research gaps, and engaging in scholarly writing. This misalignment between prior academic preparation and the expectations of Malaysian higher education institutions often led to confusion, reduced academic confidence, and a steep learning curve during the initial stages of study.

Cultural Orientation and Social Integration

Cultural familiarity, or the lack thereof, significantly influences students' experiences adapting to the Malaysian way of life. Malaysia's identity as a pluralistic society, rooted in Malay-Muslim traditions and layered with Chinese, Indian, and indigenous influences, presents a nuanced cultural landscape. Many

Chinese students have underestimated these complexities, expecting greater ease of adaptation due to ethnic or geographical proximity.

Cultural values rooted in Confucianism, including modesty, deference to authority, and group harmony, shaped students' behaviors and attitudes toward communication. Several studies have reported that Chinese students are reluctant to speak in class or challenge instructors, driven by concerns about maintaining face and avoiding social embarrassment (Huiling & Ismail, 2022; Zhai & Razali, 2022). These cultural norms conflict with the more interactive and participatory expectations common in Malaysian EMI settings, thereby limiting students' social engagement and integration.

Furthermore, sociocultural integration is constrained by ethnic and religious dynamics within the host environment. Although Malaysia is known for its multiculturalism, Singh and Jack (2022) reported that domestic students tended to socialize within their own ethnic groups, which hindered the formation of intercultural friendship. Even among students who share religious backgrounds, adaptation remains challenging. Zhang and Wahab (2022) reported that Chinese Muslim students from Ningxia, China, struggled to adjust to Malaysia's Islamic practices, dietary customs, and tropical climate. Similarly, Chinese students from Xinjiang, China, have also faced difficulties related to climate and diet, Islamic norms, values, and the ability to build friendships with local peers (Tuerxun et al., 2020).

Unlike the homogeneous cultural settings of many Western countries, Malaysia's hyper-diverse social environment demands continuous navigation across multiple cultural scripts, adapting an ongoing and effortful process for international students. These overlapping challenges contributed to emotional strain, social isolation, and cultural dissonance, particularly during the early phases of their academic journey.

Institutional Support

Institutional support is vital for the academic and sociocultural adaptation of Chinese students in Malaysia, yet its quality varies widely, highlighting gaps in policy and intercultural readiness (Singh, 2018). Practical measures, including structured orientations, academic counseling, and staff intercultural training, are essential. Academic writing centers and language support services also ease academic challenges and reduce stress (Bi & Ahmad, 2024).

Peer and faculty mentoring networks further facilitate students' adjustment to academic life in Malaysia. Chan et al. (2021) emphasized that formalized mentoring structures foster interpersonal connections, encourage help-seeking behaviors, and strengthen mutual understanding between international students and the local academic community. In Malaysia's multicultural environment, where navigating diverse social norms, religious practices, and institutional expectations can be challenging, such networks are particularly crucial.

Conversely, the absence of adequate support mechanisms may intensify the difficulties encountered by Chinese students. The evidence suggests that international students often experience social isolation due to a lack of guidance on halal dietary habits and Islamic cultural norms (Abd & Ahmad, 2023).

Inadequate institutional guidance hinders students' ability to participate and adapt to the multicultural environment in Malaysia (Tuerxun et al., 2020). These findings indicate that inconsistent support hampers Chinese students' ability to navigate and adapt to Malaysia's multicultural environment.

Research Methods and Theory

Among the 20 studies analyzed, over half employed qualitative methods, primarily semi-structured interviews, to investigate students' challenges and coping mechanisms (e.g., Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Huiling & Ismail, 2022; Singh, 2018; Zhai & Razali, 2022a, 2022b). These studies typically applied thematic analysis or coding to derive key themes, with only a few providing detailed procedural transparency following established analytical frameworks, such as Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis (Bi & Ahmad, 2024) or Nowell et al.'s (2017) approach (Zhai & Razali, 2022a, 2022b). The lack of analytic transparency in most studies is particularly noteworthy in the Malaysian context, where the cultural and linguistic diversity of campuses necessitates careful and systematic qualitative interpretation.

Quantitative methods were also present, although they are comparatively underutilized. Studies such as those of Chan et al. (2021), Shi et al. (2019), and Xie et al. (2023) employed cross-sectional survey designs and statistical analyses, including descriptive analysis, regression analysis, and structural equation modeling, to assess the relationships between adaptation variables. The integration of psychometric tools and statistical rigor in these studies enhances their generalizability but often limits the depth of cultural nuance captured.

Importantly, only one study among the reviewed body of literature employed mixed methods approaches to balance depth and breadth (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). This study integrated both quantitative (questionnaires, descriptive statistics, t- tests) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, coding) techniques to explore academic adaptation challenges. By combining methods, the authors were able to provide both breadth and depth in their analysis, offering a more holistic view of Chinese students' difficulties in English academic writing. The study also involved data collection across five public universities, enhancing the generalizability and contextual richness of its findings. This integration of methods remains rare in the current literature, highlighting a gap where mixed-method designs could significantly enrich the understanding of complex adaptation processes.

In terms of theoretical application, the literature demonstrates varying degrees of theoretical engagement. A minority of studies have rooted their inquiries in clearly articulated frameworks such as cross-cultural adaptation theory (Kim, 2001) (Abd & Ahmad, 2023; Bi & Ahmad, 2024), acculturation theory (Yakin & Totu, 2018), the U-curve hypothesis (Tuerxun et al., 2020), and the input-environment-output model (Singh & Jack, 2022). These frameworks provide structured lenses through which to examine the multidimensional nature of adaptation, although their application ranges from rigorous to superficial. For example, while Kim's theory is referenced repeatedly, not all studies engage

critically with its core concepts, such as stress-adaptation-growth or communication competence.

Moreover, some studies demonstrate theoretical pluralism by integrating multiple perspectives. For instance, Zhai and Razali (2022a, 2022b) draw from both self-efficacy theory and communicative competence theory to examine how Chinese students manage language-related challenges. This dual-theoretical approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of students' confidence and functional language use in academic settings. Despite these examples, many studies lack a clear theoretical foundation or fail to incorporate the selected frameworks into the research design and analysis. Studies such as Hor and Jusoh (2021), Fei et al. (2023), and Shi et al. (2019) fall short in linking findings to a conceptual framework, which weakens analytical depth and limits their contribution to theory building. In some cases, the absence of a theoretical underpinning appears to stem from an exploratory intent, particularly in case studies or small-N qualitative inquiries. While the exploratory nature of some case studies may account for this omission, the absence of a guiding framework constrains the interpretive power of their findings.

Data analysis techniques also exhibit substantial variation in both depth and clarity. In qualitative research, thematic analysis and coding are the dominant analytic methods, yet few studies offer a transparent account of how themes are generated, refined, or verified. Some researchers mention the use of software tools, whereas others provide no information on their analytic procedures. A notable exception is Wong and Liu (2024), who employ AI-assisted theme coding. On the quantitative side, most studies report using standard measures such as Cronbach's alpha for reliability and employing correlation, regression, or other inferential statistics. However, detailed justification for the selection of specific statistical tests, as well as discussion of test assumptions, is often lacking.

DISCUSSION

A growing body of research has identified language proficiency as a critical barrier to the academic adaptation of Chinese international students. Challenges related to academic writing, oral communication, and comprehending specialized English terminology are particularly evident. In Malaysia's EMI context, students with limited English proficiency often face difficulties in actively participating in classroom discussions, establishing effective communication with lecturers and supervisors, and engaging in academic tasks and group work (Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Huiling & Ismail, 2022; Zhai & Razali, 2022). While English-language challenges are common in global contexts, the Malaysian setting is distinct because of its multilingual higher education landscape, where English, Malay, and sometimes Mandarin co-exist. This layered linguistic environment may create additional adaptation difficulties for Chinese students who are unfamiliar with Malaysian English accents, code-switching practices, and localized terminology.

In addition to language issues, differences in educational practices between China and Malaysia contribute significantly to academic adaptation challenges. Studies have revealed that Chinese students, accustomed to teacher-centered

learning and exam-driven assessment systems, often face difficulty adjusting to Malaysia's more interactive, student-centered pedagogies (Zhang & Wahab, 2022). While previous research in Western contexts (e.g., Cao, Zhu & Meng, 2018; Lucas, 2019; Min, 2016) has pointed to Confucian-heritage learners' tendency toward deference to authority and reluctance to question instructors, there is still limited research specific to how Malaysia's hybrid academic culture, which is shaped by both Asian and Western influences, affects Chinese international students' academic engagement. This context merits closer examination, particularly regarding supervision relationships and academic independence in postgraduate coursework and mixed-mode programs and how Chinese students' educational backgrounds and values influence their learning behaviors and expectations in EMI classrooms.

In terms of sociocultural adaptation, studies have reported that Chinese students confront challenges in navigating unfamiliar social norms, religious customs, and lifestyle differences in Malaysia (En et al., 2024; Yakin & Totu, 2018). Norms such as halal food restrictions, prayer times, Islamic dress codes, and gender norms have been cited as contributing to adaptation difficulties, especially for students unfamiliar with Islamic customs (Hor & Jusoh, 2021). Moreover, establishing meaningful connections with Malaysian peers can be challenging due to cultural differences, language barriers, and limited opportunities for cross-cultural interaction. This lack of integration often leads to a sense of detachment from the local community (Tuerxun et al., 2020).

Environmental factors such as food, climate, and daily routines also complicate the adaptation process. Chinese students often experience discomfort with Malaysia's hot and humid environment, unfamiliar cuisine, and differing social etiquette. Despite these challenges, social support has been identified as a key facilitator of sociocultural adaptation. Friendships with co-national peers, support from fellow international students, and engagement in social networks can ease the transition (Chan et al., 2021; Yusoff, 2011). However, difficulties in forming cross-cultural friendships may persist, as Zhang & Hasim (2023) noted, particularly when institutional support for intercultural engagement is insufficient.

The collectivist orientation of Chinese students, rooted in cultural values emphasizing interdependence, group harmony, and strong emotional bonds, also shapes their adaptation strategies and social preferences (Ma et al., 2020). When adapting to a new collectivist yet culturally distinct society such as Malaysia, students may seek comfort within their own ethnic or linguistic groups, which can both support and limit their sociocultural integration. Cultural similarity may provide a conceptual foundation for sociocultural adaptation, but practical barriers, such as language differences, citizenship identity, and local Chinese cultural expressions, may result in limited social bonding.

The reviewed literature highlights a picture of Chinese international students in Malaysia navigating a complex adaptation landscape shaped by the intersection of language, pedagogy, culture, and religion. Academic adaptation is challenged by both limited English proficiency and a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogical styles. Socio-culturally, students encounter both

opportunities and obstacles within Malaysia's multicultural environment. While ethnic familiarity may ease surface-level adjustment, deeper integration remains elusive due to limited intercultural engagement and inadequate institutional support.

Although Malaysia shares some adaptation challenges with Western countries, its unique linguistic, cultural, and religious dynamics present a distinct set of circumstances that demand tailored research and policy responses. Despite growing interest in this field, existing studies remain fragmented and often overlook the interaction between institutional variation and cultural context in shaping student experiences. A more contextualized and systematic investigation of these dynamics is necessary to support the academic and social well-being of Chinese international students in Malaysia.

Implications and Future Directions

The reviewed literature reveals significant implications for policy and practice in supporting Chinese international students' adaptation in Malaysian higher education institutions. First, academic adaptation challenges, particularly those related to English proficiency, pedagogical differences, and supervisor–student relationships, are commonly highlighted across qualitative and quantitative studies (e.g., Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Fei et al., 2023; Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Institutions should invest in more tailored academic support mechanisms, including discipline-specific language training and pre-arrival academic orientation programs that explicitly address differences in educational expectations and academic communication norms.

In terms of sociocultural adaptation, several studies emphasize the role of language barriers, cultural unfamiliarity, and limited opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural interaction as critical obstacles (e.g., Huiling & Ismail, 2022; Yakin & Totu, 2018). These findings suggest the importance of developing intercultural engagement initiatives such as peer-mentorship schemes, intercultural workshops, and language exchange programs. Such programs can facilitate integration and reduce social isolation. Moreover, the ability of online communities and social networking platforms to promote sociocultural well-being, as shown by Wong and Liu (2024), indicates that digital tools can be effectively used to enhance belonging and social support in virtual and hybrid learning environments.

Institutional and environmental factors also play essential roles. Several studies underscore how the friendliness of the campus environment, the inclusiveness of academic staff, and institutional practices influence students' overall adaptation experiences (e.g., Singh, 2018; Chan et al., 2021). Therefore, policymakers and educational administrators should prioritize creating inclusive and student-centered academic environments. This can be achieved through staff development programs, regular quality monitoring, and student feedback mechanisms.

Future research should address several gaps. In terms of methodology, many studies adopt qualitative designs, which provide valuable insights but often lack generalizability. Future studies should adopt mixed methods or longitudinal

designs to explore how these domains evolve. In addition, most studies rely on small, single-site qualitative samples. There is a clear need for larger, multisite comparative studies to capture the diversity of different institutions, disciplines, and student backgrounds. More mixed methods and longitudinal studies are also needed to track adaptation over time in various university settings. Concurrently, future research should expand its focus to private universities to more fully demonstrate or compare the experiences of Chinese international students in different institutional contexts.

From a theoretical perspective, the reviewed studies draw on a range of frameworks, including cross-cultural adaptation theory, the U-Curve Model, and anxiety/uncertainty management theory. However, some studies do not identify a guiding theory, which limits analytical depth. Future research should apply theoretical models more explicitly and consider integrating multiple frameworks to capture the complexity of the adaptation process.

Furthermore, future research should explore the roles of psychological factors such as motivation, resilience, and well-being in shaping adaptation outcomes. The use of technology and social media in facilitating academic and social adjustment is another promising area that deserves further investigation. Comparative studies across different student groups, programs, and institutions would also be valuable in identifying best practices and informing policy development. Finally, future research should include the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as faculty members, administrative staff, and local peers, to develop a more holistic understanding of the inter-adaptation system.

AI Tool Usage and Author Responsibility

In preparing this manuscript, we did not utilize artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation. We acknowledge full responsibility for the integrity of the content and its compliance with ethical standards, as per COPE guidelines and the Journal of International Students.

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Author bios

MANJET KAUR MEHAR SINGH is an Associate Professor at the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia. She holds a PhD in language studies and has been attached to the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation for the past 29 years. Manjet Kaur's interests are broad and include sociolinguistics, language teaching and learning, academic literacy(ies), discourse, and multilingualism. She has extensive experience as a keynote, invited and plenary speaker at international events. She also manages the International Journal of Language, Literacy and Translation (IJoLLT) as the Chief Editor. Manjet Kaur is also listed by Britishpedia (4th edition, 2022) as one of the "successful people in Malaysia' in the field of education.
Email: manjeet@usm.my

WENOU XUE, PhD candidate, School of Languages, Literacies & Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her main research interests are in the fields of multiculturalism and language application.
Email: wenou@student.usm.my