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Unveiling the Academic, Sociocultural, and Psychological Adaptation Challenges of Chinese International Students in Malaysia: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review explores the academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation challenges encountered by Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions, synthesizing findings from 24 peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2024. It highlights Malaysia's distinct adaptation context, characterized by unique language barriers within an English-medium instruction (EMI) setting, cultural and religious differences, and specific social integration challenges. This review offers new insights into the adaptation process of Chinese students by framing these challenges within Malaysia's multicultural, predominantly Islamic, environment, which presents unique dynamics compared with Western educational contexts. The findings also reveal research gaps and offer recommendations for institutional policies to enhance the adaptation experience of Chinese students in Malaysia.

Keywords: Chinese international students, academic adaptation, sociocultural adaptation, psychological adaptation, English medium instruction (EMI), Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

China is the leading source of international students worldwide, with 703,500 Chinese nationals studying abroad in 2019 (MOE, 2020). Malaysia is increasingly acknowledged as an emerging education hub in Asia (Singh & Jack, 2022), with notable growth in the number of Chinese students choosing to study in Malaysia. In 2023, the number of applications from Chinese students was 26,627,

accounting for 41.03% of all international student applications. This makes Chinese students the largest group of international students in Malaysia (EMGS, 2023).

Adapting to a culturally unfamiliar environment may pose a significant challenge for international students, as they simultaneously address the complexities of balancing their home culture with that of the host country (Zhou et al., 2008). This dual cultural adaptation process typically leads to acculturation stress, as students struggle to fit into new cultural norms while maintaining their cultural identity. The experience of reconciling two cultures affects their academic performance and psychological well-being (Ward et al., 2001).

Previous scholars have classified the adaptation challenges that international students encounter in a new academic and cultural environment into three key domains, namely, academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation (e.g., Brisset et al., 2010; Yu, Mak & Bodycott, 2019). These challenges not only hinder their academic performance (Liu, Ping & Gau, 2019) and, in some instances, lead them to drop out of school (Van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020) but also result in severe psychological distress, which can severely affect the mental health of international students (Yu, Mak & Bodycott, 2019).

With the growing number of Chinese international students in Malaysia, there is increasing concern about their adaptation status. Zhai and Razali (2022) identified several key challenges confronting Chinese students, including speaking anxiety, cultural differences, limited terminology, insufficient subject knowledge, and difficulties adapting to the speed of speech and local accents of Malaysians. These challenges are exacerbated by a lack of English language proficiency, unfamiliarity with Malaysian teaching methods, and the influence of traditional Chinese 'face' culture. In addition, most Chinese students are only exposed to test-oriented English writing training (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL), which restricts their ability to write academic papers (Zhang & Hasim, 2023).

Owing to their limited English proficiency, Chinese students are embarrassed when they cannot understand lectures and jokes presented by lecturers or peers in the classroom, which may generate anxiety and affect their academic performance and emotional well-being (Hor & Jusoh, 2021). It also seriously hinders their classroom participation, for instance, teacher–student interactions, group discussions, etc. (Huiling & Ismail, 2022), and they lack critical thinking skills, especially in academic writing (Zhang, Elliot & Makara, 2024).

Scholars have also stated that traditional Chinese Confucian culture emphasizes harmony, obedience, and respect for authority (Biggs, 1996). Students are expected to behave submissively, respectfully, and diligently in their learning, and teacher-centered pedagogy and rote learning shape the classroom atmosphere, typically leading to students' passive participation (Cheng, 2000; Rear, 2017), thus making adapting to different teaching styles difficult (Qu & Song, 2024). In Malaysia, the influence of Islam as the state religion poses additional challenges for non-Muslim Chinese students, who may struggle to adapt to unfamiliar religious practices and social expectations (Harrison & Peacock, 2009; Shafaei & Razak, 2016).

Concurrently, students from mainland China found it difficult to adapt to the tropical rainforest climate of Malaysia, which contributed to their adverse emotional responses upon arrival in Malaysia, such as feeling lonely, confused, and uncertain, which may result in regret and reconsideration of their decision to study abroad. In turn, these emotional struggles cause students to feel overwhelmed and isolated (Zhang & Wahab, 2022).

Yakin and Totu (2018) conducted a qualitative study of 46 Chinese international students at a public university in Malaysia and reported that 42.2% of the participants suffered from depression, 72.7% suffered from anxiety, and 34.8% reported feeling stressed. In addition, the lecturers in the study reported that Chinese students possessed discipline and concentration problems, as well as academic misconduct, such as cheating, plagiarism, and trying to hide their identity during examinations (Yakin & Totu, 2018, p. 250). These findings suggest significant psychological and behavioral problems among Chinese students.

Nonetheless, Malaysia is also regarded as an emerging yet under researched educational hub within Asia (Singh & Jack, 2017). A literature review is an effective method of integrating research findings by providing a comprehensive analysis of the available evidence, determining trends, and revealing gaps in the literature that require further research (Snyder, 2019, p. 333). Hence, this systematic literature review of existing research and key challenges related to the academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation of Chinese students was conducted in Malaysia from 2010-2024.

METHOD

As Moher et al. (2009) stated, a systematic review attempts to identify all the empirical evidence that fulfills predefined inclusion criteria, employing a transparent and systematic approach to minimize bias. Reviewing relevant publications and available data ensures reliable findings that are synthesized to draw solid conclusions and inform decision-making.

A comprehensive search strategy was employed, combining electronic and manual approaches to ensure thorough coverage. Academic databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar served as primary sources for identifying relevant studies. To complement this, manual searches were conducted, specifically those that targeted references from prior literature reviews. This dual-method approach was designed to increase the breadth of the review and mitigate potential gaps in the electronic search process.

To capture a comprehensive range of relevant research, a variety of synonyms and related terms were used as search keywords. Notably, as Searle & Ward (1990) indicated, the terms “adaptation”, “adjustment”, and “acculturation” are commonly used interchangeably in the academic literature. For a precise search of the literature, stress, depression, and well-being (Ng et al., 2017), which are related to the process or outcome of adaptation, were also searched as keywords.

Given this, these three terms were also included as keywords to ensure the widest coverage of relevant literature. The keywords searched included Chinese

Table 1: Keywords for article retrieval

Database	Search Keywords
Google Scholar	intitle: "Chinese international students" or "Chinese students" AND ("cross-cultural adaptation" OR "acculturation" OR "academic adaptation" OR "academic adjustment" OR "sociocultural adaptation" OR "sociocultural adjustment" OR "psychological adaptation" OR "psychological 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”) AND (“academic adaptation” OR “academic adjustment”) OR (“sociocultural adaptation” OR “sociocultural adjustment”) OR (“psychological adaptation” OR “psychological adjustment”) OR (“depression” OR “well-being” OR “stress”) AND (“Malaysia” OR “Malaysian higher education”)

students, Chinese international students, cross-cultural adaptation, cross-cultural adjustment, acculturation, academic adaptation, academic adjustment, sociocultural adaptation, sociocultural adjustment, psychological adaptation, psychological adjustment, depression, well-being, stress, Malaysia, and Malaysian higher education. The review focused on studies published in English between 2010 and 2023 to ensure a comprehensive overview of the latest findings (Table 1).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: (1) articles published in English; (2) articles published between 2010 and 2023; (3) investigations of academic, sociocultural, and psychological 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 2010; (2) review papers, discussion papers, autobiographies, preprints, government policy documents, and conference proceedings; and (3) off-topic studies.

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeline	2010-2024 (September)	<2010
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

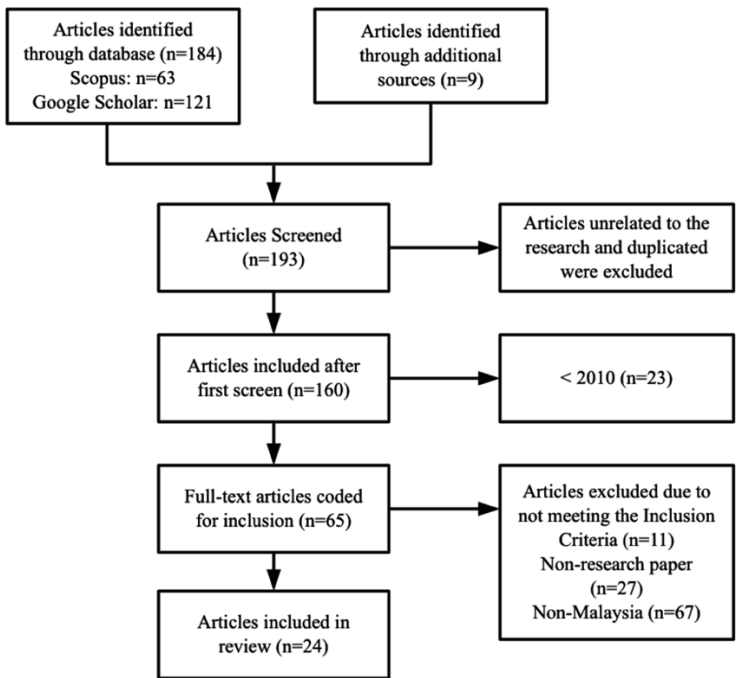


Figure 1: Flow diagram of the process of article selection

A comprehensive flowchart was also developed to synthesize the similarities identified across 24 studies on the adaptation challenges encountered by Chinese students in Malaysia. This flowchart highlights the common areas of research focus, theoretical frameworks employed, research designs adopted, data collection methods utilized, and key findings revealed by these studies. It serves as a visual summary, offering a clear and concise overview of the shared patterns

and themes in the literature. Please refer to the Appendix for specific details about the 24 articles.

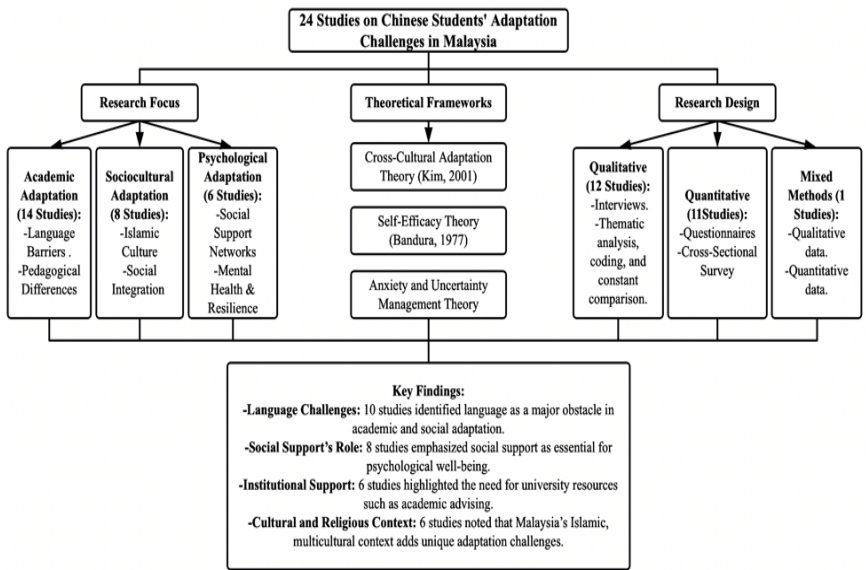


Figure 2: Synthesis of Commonalities in 24 Studies on Chinese Students’ Adaptation Challenges in Malaysia

Data Abstraction Procedure and Methodological Quality Assessment

By entering all the selected keywords and conducting an initial search, 121 articles, 63 articles, and 9 articles were retrieved from Google Scholar, Scopus, and other sources, respectively. Through the time setting, articles before 2010 were eliminated first, which totaled 23 articles. Following manual deletion of duplicates and irrelevant studies conducted in non-Malaysia, a total of 65 articles were identified for full-text review. A total of 24 articles meeting the inclusion criteria were identified through a meticulous review of their titles, abstracts, and full texts. The article selection process is depicted in Figure 1, and detailed information about the selected articles is presented in Figure 2.

RESULTS

Sample characteristics

The reviewed studies cover a broad spectrum of participant demographics and sample sizes, highlighting diverse research approaches. Quantitative-focused studies, such as Weidi and JeeChing (2023), employed larger sample sizes (N=490), providing generalizable insights into broader trends. In contrast, small-scale qualitative studies, such as those of Hor and Jusoh (2021) and Zhai and

Razali (2022a), with sample sizes of five or six participants, delved deeper into personal experiences, revealing subtle emotional and social dimensions.

Most studies have focused primarily on Chinese students studying in Malaysia, highlighting the significant presence of Chinese students within Malaysia's international student population and aligning with the scope of the research question. However, exceptions such as Yusoff (2011) and Chan et al. (2021) included international students from diverse countries, facilitating cross-cultural comparisons. While this broader perspective provides insights into general adaptation challenges, it may inadvertently obscure the unique experiences of Chinese students.

Table 3: Sample characteristics and locations

Sample	Location	Articles
Chinese students	Twelve universities	Weidi & JeeChing (2023).
	Five public universities	Bi & Ahmad (2024), Zhang & Hasim (2023).
	Three universities	Qi & Haladin (2022), Tuerxun et al. (2020).
	A public university	Hor & Jusoh (2021), Li et al. (2021), Shi et al. (2019), Yakin & Totu (2018), Zhai & Razali (2022a), Zhai & Razali (2022b), Zhao et al. (2022).
	Not listed	Yue et al. (2024), Zhang & Wahab (2022).
Chinese students as one of the samples	Five public universities	En et al. (2024). Chan et al. (2021), Huiling & Ismail (2022), Singh (2018), Singh & Jack (2022), Yusoff (2011), Yusoff & Othman (2011).
	A public university	Abd & Ahmad (2023).
	Private universities	Wong & Liu (2024).
	A higher education institution	Xie et al. (2023).
	Not listed	

Moreover, the predominance of public university studies (e.g., Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Huiling & Ismail, 2022) underestimates the experiences of Chinese students at private institutions. According to Abd & Ahmad (2023), potential disparities

between public and private university experiences, such as variations in resource availability and campus culture, underscore the need for a more balanced institutional representation in future research. Table 3 presents the sample and locations.

Topic in Focus

Academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation are intertwined domains. Together, these domains shape the adaptation experience of Chinese international students in Malaysia. Academic adaptation is the most extensively researched area, with studies highlighting challenges such as language barriers, pedagogical differences, and supervisor–student relationships (e.g., Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Zhai & Razali, 2022b). However, Chinese students encounter the dual demands of mastering English for academic purposes and local English accents while potentially being exposed to Malay and multilingual environments in the classroom or administrative context (e.g., Huiling & Ismail, 2022; Shi et al., 2019). Compared with English-only environments in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia, the dual-language requirement poses an even greater challenge.

Sociocultural adaptation studies have delved into cultural integration, social interactions, and campus life, while Malaysia's tropical climate poses challenges for Chinese international students (e.g., Wong & Liu, 2024; Shi et al., 2019). The Malaysian context, with its uniquely multicultural environment, requires Chinese international students to interact not only with Malaysian Chinese but also with Malay and Malaysian Indian communities. This diversity introduces a range of linguistic and cultural nuances that often present unanticipated challenges for Chinese students as they navigate social interactions and integration. Tuerxun et al. (2020) emphasized that adapting to Islamic cultural norms (e.g., prayer schedules, dress codes, and dietary restrictions) requires significant adjustments for Chinese students. These challenges are further exacerbated by the contrast with the individualism that is more common in Western culture.

Psychological adaptation highlights the importance of social support networks and emotional resilience in alleviating stress (e.g., Li et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2024). Social networks, whether with peers or locals, are crucial in assisting students in coping with homesickness and loneliness (Yusoff & Othman, 2011). However, the Islamic cultural environment in Malaysia can sometimes create challenges for Chinese international students, who may be unfamiliar with its customs, leading to feelings of social isolation and difficulties with integration (Abd & Ahmad, 2023).

Influencing Factors

Language Proficiency

Language proficiency is a key factor influencing academic, sociocultural, and psychological adjustment, acting as both a barrier and a bridge in the adjustment process. Academically, limited English proficiency can hinder students' ability to understand lectures, engage in critical discussions, and write academic papers (Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Huiling & Ismail, 2022; Singh & Jack, 2022; Zhai & Razali, 2022a). Moreover, language barriers often lead to learning stress and difficulties (Hor & Jusoh, 2021).

With respect to sociocultural adaptation, language barriers limit Chinese international students from communicating with their peers and integrating into Malaysia's diverse cultural and social environment (Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Qi & Haladin, 2022; Shi et al., 2019). Being in this multilingual environment complicates academic communication and limits students' participation in informal social interactions and community life, as both academic English and practical conversational skills are involved.

In terms of psychological adaptation, language barriers intensify feelings of isolation and anxiety, especially when students have difficulty expressing their emotions or seeking effective support (Yue et al., 2024). Thus, language skills interact across multiple domains, underscoring their important role in shaping the experience of adaptation.

Social Support

Peer networks, particularly those involving shared cultural backgrounds, provide immediate emotional security and familiarity to help students through the initial stages of adaptation (Li et al., 2021). However, reliance on ethnically homogenous networks may inadvertently limit cross-cultural communication, depriving international students of opportunities to make connections in Malaysia's diverse society (Qi & Haladin, 2022).

Support from locals and supervisors plays a critical role in helping students navigate unfamiliar norms such as Islamic practices and multicultural dynamics (Chan et al., 2021). These interactions not only improve cultural understanding but also reduce the risk of social isolation. The robust support system provided by friends, family, and institutions, psychologically, contributes to reducing stress and fostering a sense of belonging, thereby enhancing mental health outcomes (Yusoff & Othman, 2011).

Nevertheless, the diversity of institutional support systems, as noted by Singh (2018), leads to disparities in students' experiences of adaptation. Institutions with active peer mentoring programs and cross-cultural initiatives reported better adaptation outcomes, emphasizing the necessity of structured support mechanisms that encourage cross-cultural engagement.

Cultural Attitudes and Familiarity

Students with positive cultural attitudes and an exploratory mindset are better equipped to navigate cultural differences, such as Islamic practices, dietary

restrictions, and dress codes (Shi et al., 2019). This proactive perspective transforms cultural differences into opportunities for personal growth rather than obstacles, encouraging deeper engagement with the local community. For example, integration into Malaysia's multicultural environment not only broadens students' perspectives and enhances sociocultural integration but also fosters a sense of belonging, alleviates loneliness, and contributes to improved psychological well-being.

Conversely, cultural unfamiliarity poses a significant challenge, especially when students encounter norms that starkly differ from their previous experiences. For many Chinese international students, practices such as Islamic daily prayer schedules, halal dietary requirements, and conservative dress codes can initially be unfamiliar and difficult to navigate (Tuerxun et al., 2020). This lack of familiarity often leads to anxiety and discomfort, particularly as students worry about inadvertently violating cultural norms. Such apprehension can deter them from participating fully in social and academic activities, further isolating them from the local community and hindering their adaptation process.

Institutional Support

Institutional support is a cornerstone of successful adaptation for Chinese students in Malaysia, yet the availability and quality of support vary widely across universities. Effective initiatives such as comprehensive orientation programs, academic counseling, and cross-cultural training for faculty and staff are critical in addressing students' academic and sociocultural challenges (Singh, 2018). For example, Bi & Ahmad (2024) stressed the importance of academic writing centers and language support services that support students not only in overcoming academic barriers but also in reducing stress. In addition, structured peer and faculty networks (e.g., Chan et al., 2021) promote smoother academic and cultural integration by providing students with guidance and a sense of belonging.

Inadequate institutional support, however, tends to compound the difficulties encountered by international students, with Abd & Ahmad (2023) noting that Chinese students were isolated from the wider community owing to a lack of guidance on following halal dietary practices and taboos related to Islamic culture. Similarly, Tuerxun et al. (2020) reported that inadequate orientation limited students' ability to understand and adapt to the multicultural environment in Malaysia. These findings highlight the impact of a lack of standardization on students' ability to understand and adapt to the multicultural environment in Malaysia.

Research methods and theory

Many qualitative studies have employed semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to capture in-depth narratives of students' adaptation experiences. For example, Bi and Ahmad (2024) systematically explored academic and emotional support via Clarke and Braun's (2021) six-stage thematic analysis framework, whereas Zhai and Razali (2022a, 2022b) used standard coding techniques to identify challenges related to language barriers and unfamiliar teaching practices. However, the small sample sizes of these studies

(e.g., six participants) limit the generalizability of their findings. Despite these limitations, qualitative methods remain essential for uncovering nuanced phenomena, such as the emotional and cultural challenges often overlooked in quantitative research.

Quantitative studies have employed surveys and questionnaires to assess dimensions of academic achievement, mental health, and cultural integration among students. Advanced statistical techniques, such as structural equation modeling (e.g., Chan et al., 2021), regression analyses (e.g., Qi & Haladin, 2022), and validated factor analyses (e.g., En et al., 2024), have been used to identify key predictors and correlates of adaptation. While these methods provide valuable, generalizable insights into broad adaptation patterns, they often lack the depth needed to capture the nuanced, context-specific challenges that students encounter.

Notably, Zhang and Hasim (2023) stand out as the only study to employ a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive statistics with thematic analysis. This triangulation offers a more comprehensive understanding of adaptation challenges, effectively bridging the depth of qualitative insights with the breadth of quantitative findings. However, mixed-methods research remains underrepresented in this area, marking a significant gap in the literature. Expanding the use of mixed-methods approaches could help address current methodological limitations and provide a more holistic view of the adaptation experiences of Chinese international students.

Additionally, Intercultural Adaptation Theory (3 studies) and Communicative Competence and Self-Efficacy Theory (2 studies) were the most commonly used theories, focusing primarily on understanding the multifaceted challenges that students face when adapting to new academic and cultural environments. Nevertheless, most of the studies relied on a single theoretical framework, suggesting the need for a more integrated theoretical approach to better capture the complex, interrelated nature of the adjustment experience.

The theoretical perspective that guided the synthesis of the studies reviewed draws heavily on cross-cultural adaptation theory (Kim, 2001) and its associated frameworks, which emphasize the dynamic interplay of individual and environmental factors in the adaptation process. This perspective is consistent with the multidimensional nature of the research, encompassing academic, sociocultural, and psychological domains. By adopting this perspective, the review captures how Chinese international students cope with cultural transition in Malaysia, highlighting challenges such as language barriers, educational differences, and social integration in a multicultural Islamic context. Focusing on the mutual adaptation between the individual and the environment, the theory provides a cohesive framework for understanding how students adapt to external demands while retaining their cultural identity.

DISCUSSION

Several studies have identified language proficiency as a significant barrier to academic adaptation for Chinese international students. Challenges in academic writing, oral communication, and understanding specialized terminology in English are particularly prominent. In EMI settings, limited English proficiency restricts students' ability to actively engage in class discussions, form relationships with lecturers and supervisors, and fully participate in academic activities (Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Huiling & Ismail, 2022; Zhai & Razali, 2022).

Furthermore, the differences in educational approaches between China and Malaysia present significant adaptation challenges for Chinese students. Research indicates that they often struggle to adjust to Malaysian teaching methods (Huiling & Ismail, 2022; Zhang & Wahab, 2022). Studies conducted in Western contexts have revealed that students from Confucian-heritage cultures, such as those in mainland China, typically exhibit deep respect for teacher authority, which can hinder critical thinking (Cao, Zhu & Meng, 2018; Lucas, 2019) and lead to passive classroom participation (Min, 2016; Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2022). However, research specific to the Malaysian context has yet to comprehensively examine how Chinese international students' prior educational experiences and cultural values influence their adaptation processes.

Furthermore, En et al. (2024) and Yakin & Totu (2018) highlighted the challenges resulting from adapting to unfamiliar social norms, religious practices, and lifestyle differences in Malaysia. Muslim culture has been cited as an essential factor in adaptation difficulties in Malaysia (Hor & Jusoh, 2021). Chinese students struggle to integrate into the local community and build relationships with Malaysian students, but factors such as food, climate, and cultural taboos complicate sociocultural adaptation (Tuerxun et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, social support from friends, peers, and social networks has been found to facilitate sociocultural adaptation (Chan et al., 2021; Yusoff, 2011). However, Zhang & Hasim (2023) argued that the challenges of establishing cross-cultural relationships may exacerbate feelings of loneliness and homesickness, especially in the absence of institutional support systems. A prior study revealed that collectivist cultures favor interdependence, harmony, reciprocity, and strong emotional attachment of individuals to their own group (Ma et al., 2020). Therefore, exploring the sociocultural adaptation of mainland Chinese students in Malaysia can be considered in the context of binational collectivism.

Concurrently, studies have shown that Chinese students have relatively low levels of positive mental health, which may indicate insufficient psychological support (Qi & Harradin, 2022). Zhao et al. (2022) further reported that the use of social media to keep in touch with family members and to build a sense of belonging also plays an essential role in psychological adaptation.

Moreover, previous studies conducted in Western countries revealed that Chinese international students suffer from psychological stress, such as homesickness and depression, while studying abroad and frequently suffer discrimination and isolation due to language proficiency deficits or ethnicity (e.g., Xie et al., 2019; Zhao, Chapman & O'Donoghue, 2023). In contrast, there is also

a lack of research on the experiences of Chinese international students with racial or linguistic discrimination, as well as insufficient attention given to their mental health (e.g., homesickness and anxiety), as found in the 24 articles reviewed in this study.

The reviewed literature provides a comprehensive but fragmented understanding of the academic, sociocultural, and psychological adaptation experiences of Chinese international students in Malaysia. Language proficiency has emerged as a pervasive challenge affecting not only academic success but also social interactions and emotional well-being. The dual requirements of mastering English for academic purposes and adapting to Malaysia's multilingual environment highlight the unique challenges that Malaysia faces in this regard compared with Western countries. Similarly, the disparity in educational approaches between China and Malaysia further complicates academic adjustment, requiring a nuanced exploration of students' prior educational backgrounds and cultural values.

Malaysia's multicultural and predominantly Islamic environment presents unique integration challenges. While positive attitudes and proactive engagement contribute to smoother adjustment, unfamiliar norms such as Islamic practices, dietary restrictions, and dress codes often lead to social isolation. Concurrently, institutional and peer support systems play crucial roles in mitigating these challenges, yet variations in support across universities highlight the need for standardized and inclusive practices. Despite some evidence of effective adaptation strategies, gaps remain in addressing psychological stressors such as homesickness and potential discrimination. Future research must address these gaps, particularly through mixed methods, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted adaptation process.

Implications and Future Directions

The studies reviewed presented several limitations that restrict the generalizability and depth of the findings. First, there is an overreliance on small-scale qualitative studies (e.g., Hor & Jusoh, 2021; Zhai & Razali, 2022a), which, while essential for exploring nuanced individual experiences, limits the ability to draw broader conclusions about the adaptation process of Chinese international students. In comparison, large-scale quantitative studies (e.g., Weidi & JeeChing, 2023) provide generalizable insights but often lack the depth needed to capture the emotional and contextual complexity of adaptation. The integration of these complementary approaches is further limited by the underrepresentation of mixed-methods studies, with only one of the reviewed studies employing a mixed-methods approach, leading to gaps in understanding the breadth and depth of adaptation challenges.

Second, the overemphasis on Chinese students at public universities (e.g., Bi & Ahmad, 2024; Huiling & Ismail, 2022) overlooks the potentially different experiences of students at private universities. Resource availability, campus culture, and student demographic differences in private universities (Abd & Ahmad, 2023) remain underexplored, contributing to an incomplete understanding of Chinese students' adaptation experiences in Malaysia.

Furthermore, cross-cultural comparisons in studies such as Yusoff (2011) and Chan et al. (2021), while enriching the understanding of acculturation, have the potential to diminish the specificity of Chinese students' unique challenges and strategies.

To address these limitations, future research should prioritize balanced methodologies, particularly those that use mixed methods designs. By combining the depth of qualitative insights with the generalizability of quantitative results, mixed-methods research provides a richer understanding of the adaptation process. In addition, future research should expand its focus to private universities to represent the experiences of Chinese students more fairly in different institutional contexts.

Cross-cultural comparisons should also be more specific, with a focus on the unique cultural and educational backgrounds of Chinese international students in Malaysia to avoid the convergence of their experiences. Additionally, a longitudinal study would offer valuable insights into the evolving nature of acculturation over time, capturing how the challenges and strategies that students confront change over their academic journey. Finally, exploring the intersection of adaptation with issues such as racial and linguistic discrimination and mental health will fill a significant gap identified in the current literature.

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APPENDIX

Information about the selected articles- online

<https://www.ojed.org/jis/article/view/7274/version/6772>