

China-Arab Higher Education Cooperation: History and Current Situation*

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Education cooperation is an important channel to open up multi-cooperation among the world, an inevitable product of information development, and strong support for the operation of globalization. The cooperation between China and Arab countries began with trade contact and became firmly established with the promotion of bilateral education cooperation. The ancient Silk Road had laid a solid foundation for the friendship between China and Arab nations. The “Belt and Road” Initiative proposed in the new era has strengthened mutual understanding and recognition. As one of the important parts of the education system, higher education plays a leading role in the globalization of education, and also the most important embodiment of China-Arab education cooperation. This paper will review China-Arab higher education cooperation from the historical level and current situation, to analyze the existing problems and its future development trend.

Keywords: China-Arab higher education cooperation, history, current situation

The History of China-Arab Higher Education Cooperation

China and Arab countries enjoy a long history of communication. With the help of the ancient business route of the Silk Road, China has established a long trade and cultural exchange with Arab nations. The proposal of the “Belt and Road” Initiative in the new era has consolidated mutual understanding and recognition. Along with the Arab strategy of “looking east” in recent years, China and Arab countries have intensified the development of higher education cooperation based on traditional friendship, which injected power into multi-exchange at all levels.

Before the Founding of the Peoples’ Republic of China

The initial mode of higher education exchange and cooperation between China and Arab countries is about language teaching as servicing for commerce and religion as the main purpose, which shows the one-way flow from China to Arab countries (Chen, 2008).

Emperor Wu of the Chinese Han Dynasty sent Zhang Qian to the western regions, who reached Tiaozi

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and Lixuan, which are Syria and Egypt in the present Arab world. Chinese history book *History of the Latter-Han Dynasty* records “in the ninth year of emperor He, the governor Ban Chao sent Gan Ying to the Qin Dynasty, and arrived at Tiaozi (Syria)”. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, Ban Chao was sent to the Western regions again, whose deputy Gan Ying already had arrived at the present Arabian Gulf region, Egypt, etc. During the Tang and Song Dynasties, a large number of businessmen shuttled along the ancient “Silk Road”, Among them, Arab businessmen settled in China for a long time to carry out trade and cultural exchanges, while the Chinese government began to pay attention to Arabic teaching. In 1289 of the Yuan Dynasty, the government set up a senior official school that specialized in teaching Arabic, Persian, and training translators. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, due to the invasion of Western colonialism and the policy of seclusion carried out by the two feudal dynasties, the exchanges between China and Arab countries were gradually shrinking (Wang, 2006).

It began in 1931 that China sent students studying in Arab countries designedly. At that time, in order to promote cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries and cultivate professionals who are good at Arabic, Yunnan Mingde middle school selected NaZhong, Lin Zhongming, Zhang Youcheng, Ma Jian, and others to study in Egypt’s Azhar University, while most of the Arabs came to China as businessmen, and few of them came to China for higher education. Therefore, the China-Arab higher education cooperation during that time, to a certain extent, cannot be called real cooperation, which almost served commerce and religion, and had not formed an independent form of educational exchange (Olimat, 2013).

After the Founding of the Peoples’ Republic of China

Since the founding of new China, the diplomatic relations between China and Arab countries have experienced three climaxes: Bandung Conference opened the door to the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Arab countries. China’s resumption of its legitimate seat in the United Nations led to the second climax of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Arab countries. China’s implementation of the reform and opening-up policy promoted the realization of the third climax of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Arab countries (Benabdallah, 2018; Yang, 2020). During this period, the China-Arab higher education cooperation showed two characteristics: Firstly, it mainly relied on the development of Arabic teaching. Secondly, the maturity of China’s higher education promoted the exchange and cooperation between the two sides.

After the 1980s, with the maturity of China’s higher education and the completion of its system, Chinese Arabic professional education and the cooperation with Arab countries about higher education really began. And the international exchange is mainly reflected in the cultivation of foreign students and interschool exchange (Chen, 2008).

First, the cultivation of foreign students has achieved remarkable results. In 1955, under the instruction of Premier Zhou Enlai, China sent the first batch of seven students to Arab countries, who became the first generation of Arabic translators in New China. Since then, China has sent more students to professional institutions, colleges, and universities in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Oman, Libya, Sudan, Tunisia, and other Arab countries. From 1981 to 1989, 402 students from West Asia and North Africa stayed in China. With the deepening of the reform and opening-up policy, the number of Chinese and Egyptian exchange students is gradually increasing. During the 50 years from 1955 to 2005, more than 1,000 Chinese students were sent to Arab countries. At the same time, Arab countries also sent a large number of students to China, involving the

Chinese language, science, engineering, agriculture, medicine, and other fields (Chen, 2008). In 2020, influenced by COVID-19, the number of exchange students between China and Arab countries declined sharply. But with the control of the global epidemic, it is expected that China-Arab higher education cooperation will significantly return to warm from 2021 or 2022.

Second, interschool exchanges have achieved remarkable results. After the founding of the new China, it gradually signed cultural agreements with more and more Arab countries, established a system of sending students abroad, and formed recognition of academic qualifications and degrees. The main contents of the multi-cooperation include teachers' visits, students' exchanging, scientific research cooperation, holding academic conferences, donation of books and teaching materials, etc. Besides, Chinese colleges and universities have also maintained good relations with Arab embassies in China, which has given us strong support for Chinese Arabic teaching and related research.

Characteristic Projects of China-Arab Higher Education Cooperation

Entering the twenty-first century, especially since the "Belt and Road" Initiative was proposed, China and Arab countries have begun to establish a new mechanism to promote China-Arab higher education cooperation based on the traditional communications, which has become another highlight of bilateral exchanges including the "center for language education cooperation" established under the language teaching system, the "China-Arab higher education and scientific research cooperation seminar" and the "China-Arab civilization dialogue seminar" established under the "China-Arab States Cooperation Forum", the "China-Arab University President's Forum" established under the "China-Arab economic and trade forum", and the "20 plus 20 cooperation plan for Chinese and African institutions of higher education" established under the "China Africa Forum".

The Center for Language Education Cooperation

In 1987, the group for teaching Chinese was established, which managed by the Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China (PRC). In 2007, the center for language education cooperation was established, which is responsible for managing the global centers for teaching Chinese. Since 2007, China has successively set up 14 centers for teaching Chinese and Chinese culture in Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and other Arab countries, which are an important window for China-Arab higher education exchange and cooperation. This platform not only serves for teaching Chinese and Chinese culture, but also making foreigners understanding China and promoting people to people communication.

The China-Arab Higher Education and Scientific Research Cooperation Seminar and the China-Arab Civilization Dialogue Seminar

The China-Arab states forum has proposed the certain direction and concept about promoting China-Arab higher education cooperation: improving the mechanism of China-Arab high education scientific research cooperation seminar, sharing multi-education experience and resources, strengthening higher education exchanges and cooperation, carrying out joint scientific research, increasing the number of government scholarships, expanding the proportion of graduate students and expanding professional fields, promoting Arabic teaching in China and Chinese teaching in Arab countries, increasing the number of Chinese and Arabic teaching centers of both sides, and encouraging officials in education field from both sides to visit each other (Jalal, 2014; Yao, 2014). To achieve these goals, two cultural and educational exchange mechanisms are set up

under the framework of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum: China-Arab Higher Education and Scientific Research Cooperation Seminar and China-Arab civilization dialogue seminar. The first one had been held two sessions, and the second one had been held eight sessions which provided intellectual support for China-Arab relations, especially for multi-higher education cooperation.

The China-Arab University Presidents Forum

The China-Arab University Presidents Forum is a new type of China Arab higher education exchange mechanism sponsored by the Ministry of education of PRC and the government of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, which aims to strengthen the exchange and cooperation of higher education between China and Arab countries. It is an important activity under the framework of the China-Arab Economic and Trade Forum and an important platform for the direct exchange of higher education between China and Arab countries. In September 2011, the first “China-Arab University Presidents Forum” was held in Yinchuan, Ningxia. Presidents from 13 universities in Arab countries and 31 universities in China had in-depth exchanges and discussions on such topics as “the direction and mode of teaching and research cooperation between China and Arab universities”, “how to promote the exchange of students between China and Arab universities”, “how to strengthen the language teaching cooperation between China and Arab countries”. In September 2013, the second forum was held. The number of universities attended by Arab countries increased to 27, and the number of universities in China increased to 36. The presidents of various universities held exchanges on the themes of “cooperation between China and Arab universities and joint training of specialized talents”. At present, the forum has been successfully held for four sessions. Adhering to the purpose of “equality, mutual benefit and win-win”, the “China-Arab University President's Forum” focuses on educational development, carries out experience exchange, information communication, and interschool cooperation, and actively promotes the deepening cooperation between China and Arab countries in the fields of teacher visiting, scholar exchanges, students' study abroad and joint research, which has opened up a broader space for people to people exchanges between China and Arab countries.

The 20 Plus 20 Cooperation Plan for Chinese and African Institutions of Higher Education

In November 2009, the fourth ministerial meeting of the China-Africa Forum was held in Sharm El-Sheik, Egypt, which established the 20 plus 20 cooperation plan between Chinese and African universities. The plan stipulates that 20 Chinese well-known universities and 20 African universities carry out counterpart exchanges and cooperation, providing human resource training to Africa, jointly carrying out academic research and Chinese training, and promoting the development of China-Africa higher education cooperation, which including five North African Arabia universities in the corresponding African universities.

Current Problems of China-Arab Higher Education Cooperation

There is a gap between the scale of China-Arab higher education cooperation and the present needs. As an important area along the “Belt and Road”, Arab countries have become closer and closer to China in recent years, especially in levels such as economic, energy, culture, education, etc. The existing scale and mode of multi-higher education cooperation are mainly based on language teaching and primary cultural exchanges, where there is no in-depth cooperative school running, a united system of industry, university, and research. The influence of the existing cooperation is still very limited, which cannot meet further development between China and Arab countries.

The level and quality of the multi-cooperation need to be improved. The head of the International Department of the Ministry of Education of PRC said that to strengthen the brand of “studying in China”, we need to improve the quality and management of foreigners studying in China. At present, the overall quality and level of Arab students in China still need to be improved, and most Chinese universities are relatively loose in their management and performance certification, which affects the international level and influence of Chinese universities to a certain extent. Therefore, it is particularly important to create high-quality projects for foreigners studying in China. To solve these problems, the Ministry of education of PRC is going to establish series of quality certification standards, preparatory education standards, and various professional education standards for overseas students in China, and improve the quality assurance mechanism and strengthen supervision, to ensure the healthy and orderly development of the education of overseas students in China.

Conclusion

China-Arab higher education cooperation enjoys a long history. With this cooperation, the exchanges of China and Arab countries in all aspects have achieved steady development. However, there are still many difficulties and challenges which need to be solved step by step. At present, the exchange and cooperation between China and Arab countries are more inclined to language learning, and the other subjects are still very limited, which affects the willingness of Chinese and Arab students to study in the target countries. Taking Saudi Arabia as an example, In 2016, 174,000 Saudi students went abroad to study in 34 countries around the world, among them studied in the United States accounted for 60.8%, followed by Britain, Canada, and Australia, while only 0.5% of Saudi students study in China (Yang, 2020). It is an important guarantee for China’s exchanges with Arab countries and an effective channel for building bilateral consensus to carry out cooperation with more Arab high-quality universities, enhance the level of inter-school exchanges, expand the scale of multi-cooperation, allow more Chinese students to study in Arab countries, and attract more Arab students to China. Therefore, it is imperative to expand the scale of exchanges and cooperation between China and Arab countries, strengthen the teaching management of both sides, and meet the needs of bilateral exchanges.

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