

The Current Status of Chinese Language Education Policy and Development in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The paper systematically explores the current development of the Chinese language education policy in Saudi Arabia and the effects of its implementation. Using qualitative research methods, the study analyzes the background and key elements of Saudi Arabia's Chinese language education policy through literature analysis and case studies, and describes the implementation of the policy at primary, secondary, and higher education levels, with a special focus on the progress of Chinese language curricula, teacher training, and textbook development. The study finds that Saudi Arabia has made some progress in the implementation of its Chinese language education policy, but still faces major challenges such as teacher shortages, insufficiently adapted teaching materials, and unbalanced regional development. Based on these findings, this paper proposes policy improvement recommendations and teaching practice strategies, such as strengthening teacher training, developing localized teaching materials, and expanding the coverage of the Chinese language curriculum, with a view to providing theoretical support and empirical evidence for the sustainable development of Chinese language education in Saudi Arabia. This study aims to provide references and lessons for Chinese language education policy formulation and implementation in Saudi Arabia and other countries.

Keywords: Chinese Language Education Policy; Chinese Language; Development in Saudi Arabia

Introduction

With the acceleration of globalization and China's rise in the international arena, Chinese has gradually become an important international language. As the economic and political relations between China and Saudi Arabia grow closer, the importance of Chinese language education in Saudi Arabia has also increased. Especially under the strategic framework of the "Belt and Road" initiative and Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030", Saudi Arabia, as one of the important participating countries of the "Belt and Road" initiative, has introduced and promoted Chinese language education. The introduction and promotion of Chinese language education in Saudi Arabia, as one of the important participating countries of the "Belt and Road" initiative, aims to cultivate professionals who are proficient in Chinese language, to promote the cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia in various fields, to further consolidate the strategic partnership between the two countries, and to help the realization of the goals of the "Vision 2030". The study of Chinese language education policies in countries around the world is of great significance for the localization and sustainable development of international Chinese language education (Zuluo Wang, 2023:107). However, Chinese language education in Saudi

Arabia is still in its infancy, and there is a lack of research on Chinese language education policies in Saudi Arabia, and there has not been a systematic evaluation of the challenges and effectiveness of its implementation. This has led to some difficulties in the implementation of Chinese language education policies in Saudi Arabia.

Therefore, studying the current situation of Chinese language education policy and its development in Saudi Arabia is not only of great significance in promoting the localization and sustainable development of Chinese language education in Saudi Arabia, but also can provide useful reference and borrowing for other countries.

Research Objective

The purpose of this study is to systematically explore the current status of the development of the Chinese language education policy in Saudi Arabia and the effects of its implementation. Specifically, the main objectives of this study include:

1. To sort out and analyze the background and content of the development of Saudi Arabia's Chinese language education policy in order to reveal its general framework and implementation path.
2. To describe the specific implementation of the policy in primary, secondary, and higher education, with a special focus on the progress of Chinese language curriculum, teacher training, and textbook development.
3. To identify and analyze the main challenges faced during the implementation process, such as the shortage of teachers, the adaptability of teaching materials, and the balance of regional development.
4. To put forward practical and feasible proposals based on an in-depth analysis of the status quo and challenges, aiming to provide theoretical support and empirical evidence for the sustainable development of Chinese language education in Saudi Arabia.

Literature Review

According to the research by Liao Jing (2019:18), in the 21st century, under the trend of international multilateralism, with the rapid development of China's economy, and influenced by the real needs of Sino-Arab economic cooperation and exchange, the Chinese language education policies in the Arabian Gulf region have undergone a transformation from scratch, from small-scale to large-scale. These policies have been formulated and implemented with the aim of promoting the popularization and development of the Chinese language in the region, and Chinese language education has been significantly enhanced, especially under the impetus of the "Belt and Road" initiative.

In the last decade, Chinese language education in the Middle East has made remarkable progress. In February 2007, the Confucius Institute at Saint Joseph University, the first Confucius Institute in the Middle East, was officially established in Lebanon. Subsequently, Confucius Institutes have been inaugurated and operated in many Arab countries. As of October 2022, 15 Arab countries have opened Chinese language faculties in colleges and universities, and 13 Arab countries have built 20 Confucius Institutes and 2 independent Confucius Classrooms. This shows that the Middle East has been attaching increasing importance to Chinese language education (Liao Jing, 2019:16).

As an important member of the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia's Chinese language education policy has also achieved rapid development in recent years. In 2019, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced the inclusion of the Chinese language in the national education system, which is an important milestone for Chinese language education in Saudi Arabia (Liu Wenjia and Zhang Mengfan, 2021:237). Nonetheless, Chinese language education in Saudi Arabia is still in its infancy, facing problems such as teacher shortages, insufficient teaching materials, and the need to improve teaching methods (Liu Wenjia and Zhang Mengfan, 2021:239). According to Al Roomy (2022:130), although Saudi Arabia's Chinese education policy is positive, there are still many challenges to overcome in the implementation process, such as cultural adaptation and the allocation of educational resources.

While the above studies provide rich background information on the development of global and regional Chinese language education policies, there is still a lack of research on the specifics of Chinese language education policies in Saudi Arabia. Existing studies mainly focus on the stages of policy formulation and initial implementation, and lack in-depth analysis of the effects of policy implementation. In addition, while some studies mention the problems of cultural adaptation and educational resource allocation, there is less exploration of specific solutions to these problems.

Through the above analysis, this study aims to fill the gap in existing research, deeply explore the specific implementation and effects of Chinese language education policies in Saudi Arabia, and provide theoretical support and empirical evidence to promote the sustainable development of Chinese language education in the region.

Research Methodology

1. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research method to explore the current situation of Chinese language education policy in Saudi Arabia and its implementation effects. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the policy formulation and its impact on the educational landscape.

2. Source of Data

The primary sources of data for this study include Saudi Arabia's policy documents, relevant academic papers, and news media reports. These sources provide comprehensive information on the formulation process, key contents, and the background of the implementation of Saudi Arabia's Chinese language education policy.

3. Population and Sampling

The study focuses on representative Chinese language teaching units in Saudi Arabia. One key institution selected for the case study is King Saud University, which plays a significant role in the implementation of Chinese language education. The sampling includes various stakeholders involved in the Chinese language education process, such as policymakers, educators, and students.

4. Data Collection

Data collection involves a systematic review of policy documents, academic literature, and media reports. Additionally, case studies are conducted in selected institutions. This involves collecting qualitative data through interviews, observations, and document analysis related to the Chinese language curriculum, teacher training programs, and the development of teaching materials.

5. Analysis of Data

The collected data are analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to the implementation and effects of Chinese language education policies. This analysis helps in assessing the specific impacts and challenges of policy implementation, providing insights into the successes and areas needing improvement. The findings from the analysis aim to offer practical recommendations for enhancing Chinese language education in Saudi Arabia.

Research Scope

1. Time Frame

This study covers the implementation of the Chinese language education policy since the Saudi Crown Prince's announcement of its inclusion in the national education system in 2019. The focus is primarily on developments that have occurred over the past few years.

2. Geographic Scope

The geographic focus is on educational institutions in major cities of Saudi Arabia, such as Riyadh and Jeddah. Additionally, the study also considers the promotion of Chinese language education in other regions within the country.

3. Educational Stages

The study encompasses primary and secondary schools as well as universities. It specifically analyzes the implementation of the Chinese language curriculum and teaching practices at these educational stages.

4. Policy Background

The research examines the background of the formulation of the Chinese language education policy in Saudi Arabia, detailing its key contents and current implementation status. It identifies the challenges faced during implementation and explores potential solutions, with particular emphasis on the role and impact of the China-Saudi Arabia Educational Cooperation Program (CSECP).

Research Results

1. Results Based on Research Objective 1

Research Objective 1 aimed to comprehensively sort out and analyze the development background and content of the Chinese language education policy in Saudi Arabia. The study found that in 2019, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed announced the inclusion of Chinese language into the Saudi national education system, which is an important milestone for Chinese language education in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Ministry of Education subsequently issued a relevant policy that explicitly calls for the introduction of Chinese language courses in primary and secondary schools and universities, and the inclusion of Chinese in the official school curriculum. This measure aimed to improve students' language skills and promote cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia (Liu Wenjia and Zhang Mengfan, 2021:239).²⁰²³ In August 2023, the Saudi Ministry of Education issued a directive requiring all public and private secondary schools to launch Chinese language teaching programs in the new school year, mandating the teaching of two Mandarin lessons per week. According to media reports such as the Saudi Gazette and Al-Oqaz, the Saudi Ministry of Education explicitly requested that all secondary schools should arrange for Chinese language learning in the fourth period of the first two days of the week, which will be formally integrated into the school's

teaching schedule. The Saudi education department has launched a series of incentives to encourage Chinese language learning. According to Al Okaz newspaper, students participating in Chinese language courses will be considered as volunteering, and after completing the course they will receive an additional 10 hours of volunteer work. The five students with the best academic performance will be recognized by their schools, and the Ministry of Education will also select 16 outstanding students of each gender to be recognized nationwide, and will go on study tours to China as an incentive.

2.Results Based on Research Objective 2

Research Objective 2 aimed to describe the specific implementation of the Chinese language education policy across different educational levels. The study found as follows:

(a)Progress in the development of Chinese language teaching standards and materials

Although Saudi Arabia has announced the inclusion of Chinese language in the national education system, the development of Chinese teaching standards and materials is still in progress. Currently, the Language Cooperation and Exchange Center of the Chinese Ministry of Education has reached a broad consensus and made detailed plans with the Saudi Ministry of Education on jointly developing Chinese language syllabi, establishing a curriculum system, writing teaching materials, as well as selecting and dispatching Chinese teachers and training native Saudi Chinese language teachers . These teaching materials aim to take into account the language level and cultural background of Saudi students to ensure the practicality and adaptability of the teaching content (Al Roomy, 2022:136).

(b) Teacher training and qualification

In order to ensure the quality of Chinese language teaching, the Saudi Ministry of Education initiated a Chinese language teaching training program for in-service teachers in 2023 to reserve teachers for the full-scale introduction of Chinese language courses in Saudi primary and secondary schools . The Saudi government encourages in-service teachers to participate in the Chinese language training program and provides scholarships and financial assistance to give them the opportunity to travel to China for further study. After the training, these teachers will return to Saudi Arabia and be responsible for teaching Chinese in Saudi public schools, thus alleviating the shortage of Chinese teachers in Saudi Arabia (Liu Wenjia and Zhang Mengfan, 2021:238). In addition, Saudi universities that offer Chinese language courses will also send teachers to China for training in a planned manner. For example, at the first Jeddah Academic Exchange Symposium on Chinese Language Education in Saudi Arabia, the University of Jeddah emphasized the importance of popularizing Chinese language education for the realization of Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" and planned to send a large number of teachers to China for training.

To further make up for the lack of Chinese teachers, in May 2024 the Saudi government also commissioned Han Feng Company, a subsidiary of the Chinese Ministry of Education, to recruit Chinese teachers to teach in Saudi Arabia. The company has recruited 200 Chinese teachers (100 men and 100 women) to teach Chinese in primary and secondary schools across the country. The recruitment criteria refer to the standards of the Chinese government's Language Cooperation and Exchanges Center (LCCEC), which represents the Saudi government's high requirements for the professional quality of Chinese teachers, and also has a very positive impact on the overall quality of Chinese teachers in Saudi Arabia.

(C) Chinese language curriculum and student participation

Chinese language courses are gradually becoming more popular in Saudi Arabian schools and universities. A number of colleges and universities, such as King Seward University, King Abdulaziz University, Princess Noura University and Jeddah University, have opened Chinese majors or elective courses for specialties and undergraduates, but as of June 2024, there are no master's degree or doctoral degree programs in Chinese language in Saudi universities. In public and private primary and secondary schools, Chinese language courses have been incorporated into the curriculum, with a requirement to complete two Chinese lessons per week. These programs aim to develop students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in Chinese and help them better understand Chinese culture and society (Al Roomy, 2022:135).

With the promotion of Chinese language education, the number of students enrolling in Chinese language courses is increasing year by year. According to statistics, in the 2022 academic year, a total of 871 students enrolled in Chinese language programs at Saudi universities and 207 students successfully graduated (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2022). Previously, King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, as the only Saudi university offering Chinese language programs until 2019, had only four Chinese language graduates during 2009-2019.

(D) Sino-Saudi Cooperative Chinese Language Education Program

Cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia in the field of education has been deepening. The two sides have signed a series of cooperation agreements aimed at promoting the development of Chinese language education. These cooperation programs include sending teachers and jointly running schools. Saudi Arabia's King Sultan University signed a Chinese teacher dispatch agreement with China's Ministry of Education during the Saudi Crown Prince's visit to China in 2019; Saudi Arabia's Princess Noura University and the Background Language University jointly operated the Princess Noura University Business Chinese Language Program in 2021; and Saudi Arabia's Prince Sultan University and Shenzhen University cooperated to jointly build the Confucius Institute at Prince Sultan University in 2023. In addition to this, Saudi Arabia's King Abdulaziz University has also been cooperating with the Central University for Nationalities on Chinese language teaching since 2019, and Jeddah University and Shandong Normal University have also been cooperating on online Chinese language teaching during the Xincuan Pneumonia epidemic. Through these collaborative programs, Saudi students have had the opportunity to travel to China to learn Chinese, and Chinese education experts regularly visit Saudi Arabia to provide pedagogical support and guidance .

(E) International Students and Scholarship Programs

The Saudi Government and the Chinese Government have also jointly launched a number of scholarship programs to encourage students to engage in cross-border exchanges and further their studies. Currently, 174 Saudi students, including 131 scholarship recipients and 43 self-funded students, are studying Chinese at Chinese universities. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia also offers 477 scholarships to Chinese students every year to attract Chinese students to study in Saudi Arabia. During the past five years, a total of 688 Chinese students have enrolled in public universities in Saudi Arabia (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2022). These international students who study in China have become the majority of local Chinese language teachers in Saudi Arabia after their graduation and return to Saudi Arabia, while Chinese students who study in Saudi Arabia have also participated in Chinese language education in Saudi Arabia after their graduation.

Taking King Saud University in Saudi Arabia as an example, the number of Saudi native Chinese teachers in both male and female schools is six, accounting for 75% and 60% of the total number of Chinese teachers, of which all six native teachers in the male school have a background of studying in China, accounting for 100%, and four teachers in the female school have a background of studying in China, accounting for about 66.7%. This shows that Saudi native teachers with Chinese study background occupy an important position among Saudi Chinese teachers and become the backbone of Chinese education in Saudi Arabia. Among the Chinese teachers in Saudi Arabia, there is one teacher with a background of studying in Saudi Arabia in each of the boys' and girls' schools, accounting for 50% and 25% of the number of Chinese teachers respectively. This shows that Chinese students in Saudi Arabia are also starting to participate in the Chinese education in Saudi Arabia.

Therefore, these teachers not only have the ability of Chinese-Arabic bilingual translation and cross-cultural communication, but also can play an important role in teaching Chinese in Saudi Arabia, which provides strong support for the development of Chinese education in Saudi Arabia.

Table 1 Structure of Chinese Language Teachers at King Saud University

Type of school	Total number of Chinese language teachers	Number of native Saudi teachers	Percentage of total Chinese teachers	Number of native Saudi teachers with a background of studying in China	Percentage of native Saudi teachers	Number of teachers in China	Number of Chinese teachers with Saudi study background	Percentage of Chinese teachers
Male school	8	6	75%	6	100%	2	1	50%
Female school	10	6	60%	4	66.7%	4	1	25%

3. Resultss Based on Research Objective 3:

Research Objective 3 aimed to identify and analyze the main challenges encountered during the implementation of the policy. The study found several major challenges, including:

(a)Shortage of teachers

The shortage of teachers is a major challenge in promoting Chinese language education in Saudi Arabia. Although the government has actively recruited teachers and cooperated with China to recruit Chinese language teachers, the current number of teachers is still unable to meet the growing demand for teaching. Some in-service teachers lack a professional background in Chinese language teaching, which to some extent affects the quality of Chinese language teaching. In addition, the training system for local Chinese teachers is not yet complete, and many teachers fail to receive systematic training, which leads to deficiencies in their teaching methods and content (Liu Wenjia and Zhang Mengfan, 2021:239).

(b)Inadequate teaching materials

At present, Saudi Arabia lacks Chinese language teaching materials suitable for local students. Most of the existing textbooks are imported directly from China, failing to fully take into account the cultural background and linguistic characteristics of Saudi students. These textbooks are not fully adapted to the learning needs of Saudi students in terms of content and form, resulting in many difficulties for students in the learning process. The Saudi Ministry of Education is working with relevant Chinese institutions to develop localized teaching materials, but this process requires time and resource investment (Al Roomy, 2022:136).

(c) Uneven regional development

There is an obvious imbalance in the development of Chinese language education among regions in Saudi Arabia. At present, Chinese language courses in Saudi universities are mainly concentrated in big cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah, while schools in other regions have a lower degree of popularization of Chinese education due to limited resources, and there are cases in which Chinese language courses are offered but are difficult to be sustained and finally closed down, for example, Hail and Jouf Universities closed down the Chinese language courses they were offering in 2019 and 2022 due to faculty problems, respectively. Meanwhile, the number of public universities offering Chinese language programs is higher than that of private universities. This unbalanced development not only affects the effectiveness of the promotion of Chinese language education nationwide, but also restricts the opportunities for students in remote areas to access and learn Chinese.

Table 2 Number of universities offering Chinese language programs across Saudi Arabia

Municipalities Quantities	Total number of universities	Number of public universities	Number of private universities
Riyadh	4	2	2
Jeddah	2	2	0
Taif	1	1	0
Hail	1	1	0
Jouf	1	1	0
Tabuk	1	1	0
Abha	1	1	0

(d) Cultural adaptation

The promotion of Chinese language education policy in Saudi Arabia also faces the problem of cultural adaptation. Although Chinese language education can promote cultural exchange between China and Saudi Arabia, how to balance the integration of Chinese language teaching and local Saudi culture remains an important issue in the concrete implementation process. Some parents and educators are concerned that Chinese language education may affect Saudi students' identification with their native culture and traditions (Liao Jing, 2019:19). Meanwhile the adaptation of non-Muslim Chinese teachers from China to life and work in the Islamic religious environment of Saudi Arabia is also an issue of concern. Therefore, Chinese language education needs to be conducted on the basis of respecting and integrating Saudi

culture, which requires teachers and teaching materials to be adjusted accordingly in terms of content and methodology.

4. Findings Based on Research Objective 4

Research Objective 4 aimed to propose practical and feasible recommendations based on an in-depth analysis of the current situation and identified challenges. The study suggested as follow:

(a) Recommendations for policy improvements

Strengthening teacher training and qualification. In order to cope with the shortage of teachers and improve the quality of teaching, Saudi Arabia should further strengthen teacher training and qualification, which can be achieved through the following measures: first, expanding training programs and increasing Chinese language training programs for in-service teachers, including language pedagogy, culturally adapted courses, and teaching practice; second, setting up a certification system and formulating a unified standard for teacher qualification to ensure that teachers have the necessary professional knowledge and teaching ability; and finally, strengthening international exchanges and cooperation by sending teachers to China for further training, while inviting Chinese education experts to Saudi Arabia for guidance and training.

Development and promotion of uniform Chinese language teaching standards and materials. In order to ensure the standardization and effectiveness of Chinese language teaching, Saudi Arabia needs to develop and promote uniform Chinese language teaching standards and materials. First, based on reference to international standards and taking into account the local educational needs of Saudi Arabia, develop Chinese teaching standards suitable for each educational stage; second, cooperate with Chinese educational institutions to develop localized Chinese teaching materials suitable for use by Saudi students to ensure that the content of the materials is practical and culturally adapted; and lastly, set up a platform for the sharing of Chinese teaching resources for teachers and students across the country to improve the teaching effect.

(b) Recommendations for teaching practice

Increasing the coverage of the Chinese language curriculum. In order to promote the popularization of Chinese language education, Saudi Arabia should increase the coverage of Chinese language courses and ensure that more students have the opportunity to learn Chinese. First, Chinese language courses should be offered in more primary and secondary schools and universities, especially in regions where Chinese language education resources are relatively scarce; second, Chinese language courses at different levels and in different formats, such as elective courses, interest classes and online courses, should be provided to meet the learning needs of different students.

Increasing student motivation and engagement in learning. In order to stimulate students' interest, motivation and participation in Chinese language learning, Saudi Arabia can take the following measures. First, organizing Chinese language and culture festivals, Chinese language competitions and Sino-Saudi cultural exchange activities on a regular basis to increase students' interest in Chinese language and culture; second, setting up scholarships, excellent student selection and opportunities for exchange and study in China to motivate students to work hard at Chinese language learning; and lastly, adopting interactive teaching methods, such as group

discussions, role-playing and multi-media teaching, to enhance classroom interactivity and interestingness.

(c)Proposals for cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia

Strengthening cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia in the field of education. In order to promote the development of Chinese language education, Saudi Arabia and China should further strengthen cooperation in the field of education. Firstly, continue to promote cooperative programs between Chinese and Saudi Arabian universities, and provide policy support and process facilitation for the cooperation between universities of the two countries; secondly, expand the scale of the teacher exchange program, so that more Chinese teachers can go to Saudi Arabia to teach, and at the same time, send Saudi Arabian teachers to China for exchanges and studies.

Promoting more cooperative projects and exchanges. In order to deepen the cooperation between the two countries in the field of education, Saudi Arabia and China can jointly promote more cooperative programs and exchange activities. First, organize academic seminars and educational forums between China and Saudi Arabia to share the latest research results and practical experiences in Chinese education; second, continue to expand the scale of the scholarship program to provide more Saudi students with the opportunity to study in China, while attracting more Chinese students to study in Saudi Arabia; and lastly, carry out joint research projects on Chinese education to explore the best practices and innovative methods of teaching Chinese and improve the overall level of Chinese language education. Lastly, to conduct joint research programs on Chinese language education, explore the best practices and innovative methods of Chinese language teaching and improve the overall level of Chinese language education.

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