



Research Trends and Challenges in Intercultural Communication within Global Chinese Language Education: A Bibliometric and Systematic Review (2020–2025)

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Keywords

Intercultural communication; Chinese language education; bibliometric review; cultural competence; critical pedagogy

Abstract

Intercultural communication is a critical component in Chinese language education, where linguistic proficiency must be accompanied by cultural competence. This study explores research trends, key challenges, and conceptual gaps in intercultural communication within Chinese language education from 2020 to 2025. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) combined with bibliometric analysis, 2,744 peer-reviewed articles were identified and examined from the Scopus database. Findings indicate an initial growth in research publications, peaking in 2024, followed by a sharp decline in 2025. China, the United Kingdom, and the United States dominate in terms of publication volume, while Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia are showing growing engagement. Keyword analysis reveals a strong focus on “intercultural communication,” “language education,” and “foreign language learning,” often framed within Sinocentric perspectives. Despite increased scholarly attention, the field continues to rely on conventional theories that do not adequately address the dynamic nature of cultural identities. Pedagogical practices remain fragmented, with limited integration of critical literacy and culturally responsive teaching approaches. Existing assessment tools also lack the capacity to effectively measure the complexity of intercultural competence. The findings suggest a need for the development of inclusive, context-sensitive pedagogical models and more robust evaluation tools to enhance intercultural competence in global Chinese language education.

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected global context, Chinese language education effectively serves as a bridge for cross-cultural interaction, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural diversity (Waru et al., 2025). Recent research indicates that language education is not merely about mastering vocabulary or grammar, but also involves a comprehensive understanding of the cultural context in which the language is used (SHEN Ju-ming & GAO Yong-chen, 2015). Through a critical approach to cultural literacy, students are encouraged to deconstruct their own assumptions about other cultures and expand their understanding of cultural complexity (Su, 2023) (Brown & Alford, 2023; Sun et al., 2023). However, few studies systematically map the global knowledge structure of intercultural communication within Chinese language education, especially in Southeast Asia.

Despite significant efforts to increase intercultural awareness in Chinese language education, substantial challenges (Gong et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2025). Many educational programs are still trapped in a paradigm that is too focused on an Anglophone approach, neglecting broader cultural diversity. Research shows that how teaching materials are constructed has a significant impact on students' understanding of culture (Lu & Han, 2024). This concern is further heightened when considering the importance of developing appropriate intercultural communication skills for students who will interact in diverse global contexts (Yang et al., 2024).

To frame the conceptual foundation of this study, Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is adopted as a reference point (Portraits, 1988). The model highlights five key components: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting/relating, skills of discovery/interaction, and critical cultural awareness, providing a comprehensive lens to assess how intercultural competence is addressed in Chinese language education

In this study, we aim to explore the trends and challenges faced in intercultural communication within Chinese language education, examining how current methodologies and practices can be improved to better support the development of intercultural competence. This discussion will be conducted through a bibliometric approach and a systematic review, identifying patterns in existing research from 2000 to 2025. By analyzing published articles, we aim to identify the development trends and challenges frequently encountered by educators and students in the context of Chinese language education. (Peskoller, 2025).

Additionally, this study examines the crucial role of institutional and interpersonal factors in facilitating or constraining meaningful cultural exchange between local and international students. The findings are expected to provide actionable guidance for practitioners and curriculum designers in Chinese language education to develop pedagogical frameworks that are more responsive to students' communicative and cultural needs in an era of globalization. Beyond mapping existing research, this study identifies key academic nodes and emerging research boundaries in the field of

intercultural communication within Mandarin language education. Through visual bibliometric mapping and systematic synthesis, it provides scholars with a comprehensive overview of the field's development, enabling them to trace the thematic evolution and identify research frontiers. This dual approach not only consolidates existing knowledge but also highlights underexplored contexts, particularly Southeast Asia, and proposes new directions for theory-building and pedagogical innovation. In doing so, this study contributes a novel perspective by bridging bibliometric evidence with actionable recommendations, thereby advancing both scholarly understanding and practical applications in global Chinese language education.

RQ1: What are the annual publication trends in the field of intercultural communication in Mandarin language education between 2020 and 2025? How do countries/regions, journals, and keywords relate to each other in the global research landscape?

RQ2: Which countries, regions, journals, authors, and articles have made the most significant contributions in this field, and how has scientific influence evolved?

RQ3: What keywords appear most frequently, and what thematic groups can be identified from their emergence and evolution?

RQ4: What conceptual, pedagogical, and methodological gaps have been identified in the literature, and how can these gaps provide direction for future research in intercultural communication in Mandarin language education?

To provide actionable insights for educators and policymakers to refine the program's structure and services.

METHOD

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach combined with bibliometric analysis to explore research trends and challenges in intercultural communication within the context of Mandarin language education. The methodology used follows strict and structured procedures, in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Smith et al., 2011). This approach ensures transparency, replicability, and comprehensive coverage in the process of identifying and synthesizing relevant literature.

Data Collection

The data collection phase was conducted through a systematic search in the Scopus database, covering the period from 2020 to June 2025. The search strategy used a combination of keywords and Boolean operators on Scopus, such as "(TITLE-ABS-KEY("intercultural communication") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("Chinese language" OR "Mandarin learning" OR "Chinese language education")) AND TITLE-

ABS-KEY("language education" OR "foreign language learning")), to identify relevant studies. The inclusion criteria for this research included: peer-reviewed journal articles, written in English and Mandarin, directly addressing intercultural communication in the context of Mandarin language education, and containing empirical findings or theoretical reviews.

Table 1. Keywords, components, and Justification

Keywords Phrases	Justification
"Intercultural Communication"	Core construct of the research; relates to cross-cultural language interaction
"Chinese language" Mandarin learning	Identifies the target language domain
"Chinese language education"	Narrows the focus to educational settings related to Chinese language
"language education"	Ensures inclusion of general educational research
"foreign language learning"	Broadens the scope to include comparative or related FL learning contexts

Screening and Selection

The initial search yielded 28,742 data records. After removing duplicates, 14,084 data records remained for further screening. The title and abstract were reviewed based on previously established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Subsequently, a total of 7,199 articles were analyzed to determine their full-text eligibility. Finally, 2,744 studies met the criteria and were included in this review.

Analytical Framework

Selected studies were analyzed through three levels of approach as follows:

1. **Bibliometric Analysis:** This stage measures publication trends, author networks, and geographical distribution by using visualization tools such as Biblioshiny and VOSviewer.
2. **Content Analysis:** Each study was coded based on thematic categories, including research objectives, methodology used, demographic characteristics of participants, and the intercultural communication framework applied.
3. **Scientometric Analysis:** This analysis focuses on mapping intellectual structures, identifying major research clusters, and visualizing the research frontier through co-citation and keyword co-occurrence networks.

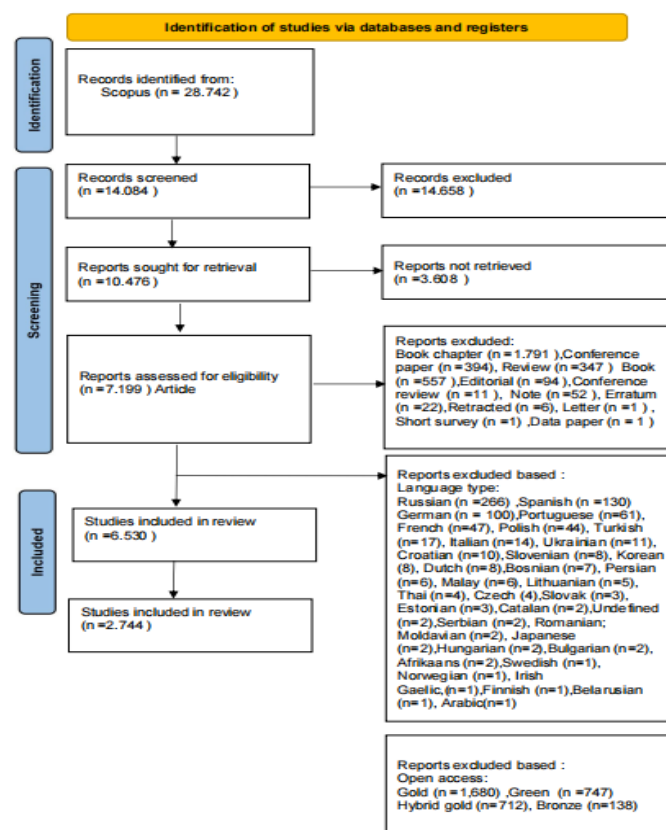
Sintesis Data

The data synthesis process was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data obtained from bibliometric analysis provided insights into publication patterns, while qualitative content analysis deepened understanding of the contextual and theoretical dimensions of intercultural communication challenges.

Limitations

Although the methodology used ensured a robust exploration of this field of study, some limitations were still acknowledged, such as the potential for language bias and the exclusion of non-peer-reviewed sources. Future research can address these limitations by including various types of publications and expanding the range of languages used.

Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review information flow using PRISMA



Data Analysis and Visualization

According to the search outcomes retrieved June 19, 2025, from Scopus database utilizing the article title, abstract, and keywords: ("intercultural communication") AND ("Chinese language" OR "Mandarin learning" OR "Chinese language education") AND ("language education" OR "foreign

language learning") across diverse academic disciplines, spanning from 2020 to the most recent in 2025, the total number of articles is 28.742 documents (refer to Figure 2). Following these findings, a screening process filters documents according to their classification. Articles are eliminated based on the documents type: Bookchapter (n=1.791 =), Conference paper(n =394), Review (n =347)Book (n =557), Editorial (n =94), Conference review (n =11), Note (n =52), Erratum (n =22), Retracted (n =6), Letter (n =1), Shortsurvey (n =1), Data paper(n=1), non-English and Chinese (n=784), and non-Open Access (3.277) culminating in a total of 7.338 documents. The screening results, categorized by document types, were 2.744 articles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Development of Intercultural Communication publication 2020-2025

Table 2 presents the annual report on research on "Intercultural Communication within Chinese Language Education," which has been published in national and international journals. According to the data, it is known that a total of 2,744 documents were found over the 6 years.

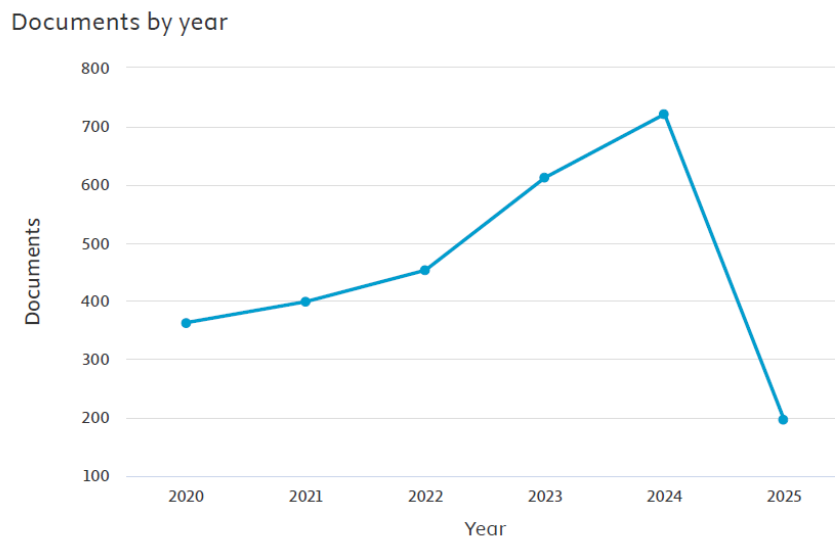
Based on the number of research documents each year, it is known that research publications regarding "Intercultural Communication within Chinese Language Education" have decreased from 2020 to 2025. Figure 3 shows a graph of the decline in the number of publications regarding "Intercultural Communication within Chinese Language Education" more clearly. Over the last 6 years. The highest number of studies on this topic was in 2024(721 documents), and the lowest number was in 2025 (196 documents). The decrease in the number of documents occurs consistently every year, but there was an increase of around 159 documents from 2022 to 2023. However, in 2025 the number of published documents on the topic of "Intercultural Communication within Chinese Language Education" decreased to around 525 documents.

Table 2. Annual reports research on "Intercultural Communication within Chinese Language Education".

Years	Documents	Percentage (%)
2020	363	13.23%
2021	399	14.54%
2022	453	16.51%
2023	612	22.30%
2024	721	26.27%
2025	196	7.14%

Years	Documents	Percentage (%)
Total	2744	100%

Figure 2. Annual reports graphic research on 2020 -2025



Trends' annual publication on intercultural communication in Mandarin language education between 2020 and 2025

Figure 3. Most relevant authors

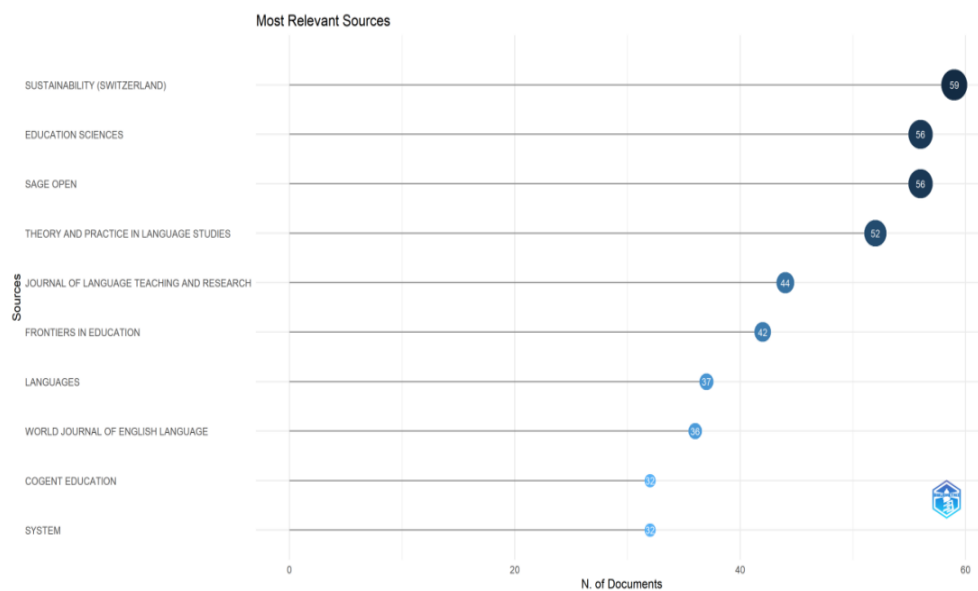
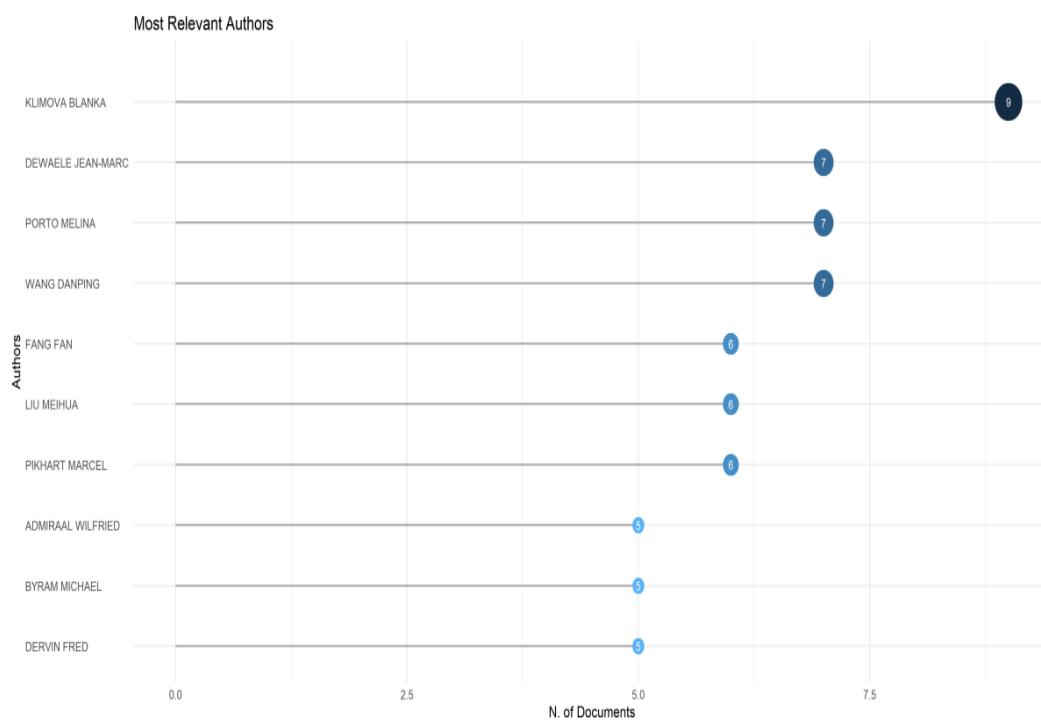


Figure 4. Most relevant sources**Table 3.** Most Relevant Sources

Sources	Articles
SUSTAINABILITY (SWITZERLAND)	59
EDUCATION SCIENCES	56
SAGE OPEN	56
THEORY AND PRACTICE IN LANGUAGE STUDIES	52
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH	44
FRONTIERS IN EDUCATION	42
LANGUAGES	37

From the most relevant public sources in intercultural communication studies in education, it is evident that reputable journals have made a significant contribution. Sustainability (Switzerland) leads with 59 articles, followed by education sciences and SAGE Open, each contributing 56 articles. These journals demonstrate a strong interest in sustainability and education in a global context, reflecting a multidisciplinary focus on the theme of intercultural communication in language education.

Additionally, journals such as *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* (52 articles) and *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* (44 articles) demonstrate a deep focus on language pedagogy. *Frontiers in education* and *languages* were also significant sources, with 42 and 37 articles, respectively, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary approaches. The contributions from journals such as the *World Journal of English Language* (36 articles), *Cogent Education*, and *System* (32 articles each) indicate a broad topic coverage, ranging from language teaching to systemic applications in education. This indicates that this research has received widespread support from leading journals, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of this study.

Table 4. Most Relevant Authors

Authors	Articles	Articles Fractionalized
KLIMOVA BLANKA	9	2.95
DEWAELE JEAN-MARC	7	2.75
PORTO MELINA	7	3.33
WANG DANPING	7	5.00
FANG FAN	6	2.20
LIU MEIHUA	6	5.50
PIKHART MARCEL	6	1.45
ADMIRAAL WILFRIED	5	1.58
BYRAM MICHAEL	5	2.50
DERVIN FRED	5	1.92

Analysis of the most relevant authors in intercultural communication research reveals significant contributions from several prominent figures. Klimova Blanka is in the top position with 9 articles, although her fractionalized contribution count is 2.95, indicating involvement in various collaborative projects. Dewaele Jean-Marc, Porto Melina, and Wang Danping each contributed 7 articles, but Wang had the highest fractional contribution score (5.00), reflecting a significant level of individual contribution compared to their peers.

Additionally, authors such as Fang Fan, Liu Meihua, and Pikhart Marcel also demonstrated a consistent presence, each with 6 articles. Liu stands out with the highest fractional contribution in the table (5.50), reflecting an intense dedication to the projects he leads or manages. Authors such as Admiral Wilfried, Michael Byram, and Fred Derwin, who have 5 articles, demonstrate their significant role in this research, with diverse contributions. Overall, this data highlights the significant

contributions of various interdisciplinary authors, reflecting global collaboration and diverse perspectives in the study of intercultural communication.

Global research trends and contributions in intercultural communication within chinese language education research in the country

Figure 5. Corresponding Author's Countries

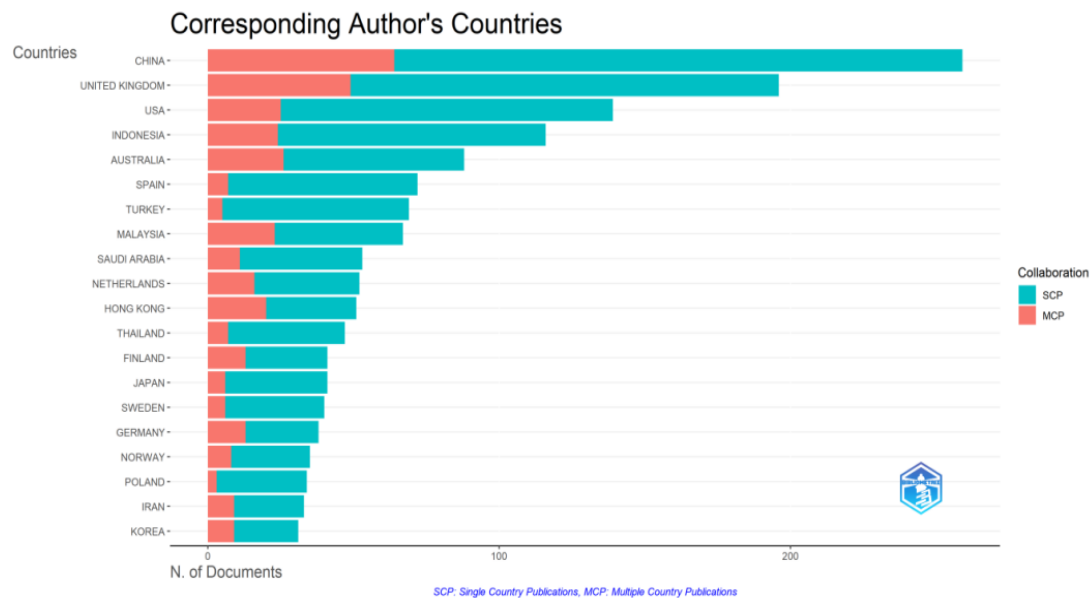


Table 5. Distribution of Articles by the corresponding authors' countries

Country	Articles	Articles %	SCP	MCP	MCP %
CHINA	259	9.5	195	64	24.7
UNITED KINGDOM	196	7.2	147	49	25
USA	139	5.1	114	25	18
INDONESIA	116	4.3	92	24	20.7
AUSTRALIA	88	3.2	62	26	29.5
SPAIN	72	2.7	65	7	9.7
TURKEY	69	2.5	64	5	7.2
MALAYSIA	67	2.5	44	23	34.3
SAUDI ARABIA	53	2	42	11	20.8
NETHERLANDS	52	1.9	36	16	30.8

Note: SCP- Single Corresponding Author publication; MCP- Multiple Corresponding Author publications; MCP_% /MCP_Ratio - Ratio Multiple Corresponding Author publications.

Analysis of the contribution of global research in intercultural communication in Chinese language education shows China's dominance with 259 articles, most of which are single-country publications (SCP). However, only 24.7% involved cross-country collaboration (MCP), reflecting limitations in collaborative initiatives despite significant output. The United Kingdom and the United States were also significant contributors, with 196 and 139 articles, respectively, indicating a higher tendency toward international collaboration (25% and 18% MCP). Indonesia, with 116 articles and an MCP percentage of 20.7%, demonstrates growing interest in this field, particularly as a non-native speaker context offering unique perspectives. Countries like Malaysia, the Netherlands, and Australia show higher proportions of MCP (34.3%, 30.8%, and 29.5%), indicating a strong emphasis on international collaboration that can enrich research through extensive academic networks. Conversely, Turkey and Spain have lower percentages of MCP (7.2% and 9.7%), suggesting a need to enhance collaborative initiatives. This data highlights the importance of global partnerships in expanding the scope of research and providing more comprehensive solutions to the challenges of intercultural communication in Chinese language education.

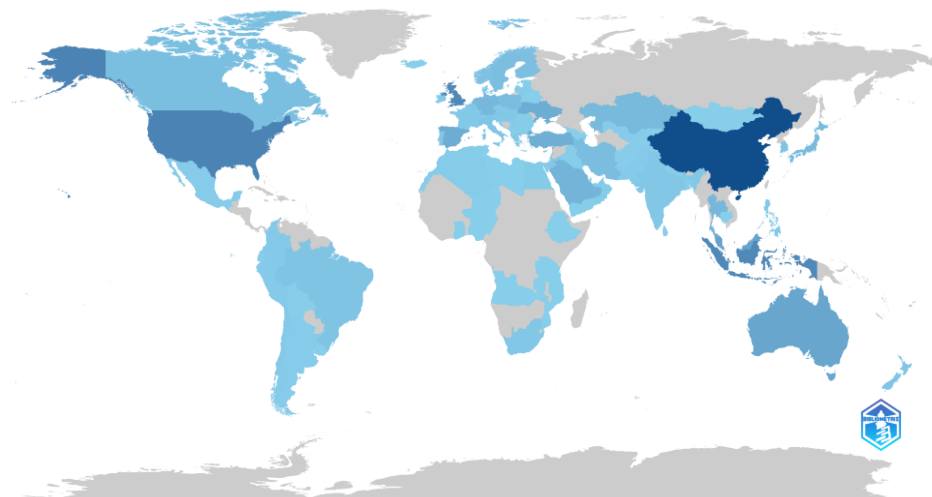
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Table 6. Country Scientific Production

Country	Freq
CHINA	635
USA	361
UK	333
INDONESIA	332
MALAYSIA	196
AUSTRALIA	188
SPAIN	154
UKRAINE	153
TURKEY	147
SAUDI ARABIA	122

Figure 6. Country Scientific Production

Country Scientific Production



The geographical distribution of scientific contributions reflects global involvement in intercultural communication issues within the field of Chinese language education. As shown in Figure 5 and detailed in Table 5, China holds the top position as the main contributor with a total of 259 articles (9.5%), consisting of 195 single-country publications (SCP) and 64 cross-country collaborative publications (MCP), indicating a relatively high level of international collaboration ($MCP\% = 24.7$). This dominance is not surprising given China's position as the country of origin for the language being taught and as the main driver of the global spread of Chinese language learning policies.

The United Kingdom and the United States followed, contributing 196 (7.2%) and 139 (5.1%) articles, respectively. The UK recorded an international collaboration percentage (25%) almost identical to China's, reflecting a similar trend in cross-border collaboration. Meanwhile, the United States showed a slightly lower MCP figure (18%), but it still plays a significant role in the development of this field. Remarkably, Indonesia ranked fourth with a contribution of 116 articles (4.3%), indicating growing academic attention to Chinese language education in Southeast Asia, especially in contexts requiring high intercultural competence. With an MCP of 20.7%, Indonesia also showed a moderate but increasing trend of international collaboration.

Additionally, countries like Australia (88 articles, $MCP\% = 29.5$), the Netherlands ($MCP\% = 30.8$), and Malaysia ($MCP\% = 34.3$) stand out for their high levels of international collaboration compared to their total research output. This indicates that although their total contribution is smaller compared to China or Western countries, the academic communities in these countries are highly integrated into the global scientific network. Frequency data also shows that China (635) and the United States (361) are the most frequently cited or mentioned national contributors, while Indonesia (332) recorded

activity almost equal to that of the United Kingdom (333), indicating its growing influence in this domain. This finding signifies an evolving and decentralized research landscape, where the study of intercultural communication in Chinese language education is no longer dominated by traditional academic powerhouses but is increasingly shaped by cross-regional engagement and global collaboration.

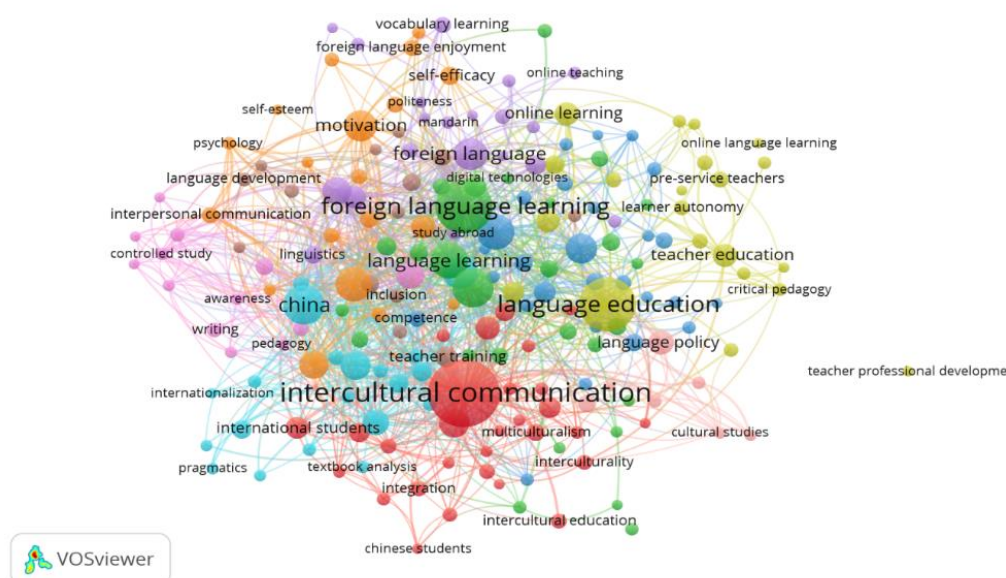
Visualization of Intercultural Communication Topic Network with VOS viewer

Source: Output Vosviewer software

Table 7. Keywords by Authors

Rank	Keyword	Total link strength
1	Intercultural Communication	370
2	Foreign language learning	305
3	Education	296
4	China	290
5	Language Education	252
6	multilingualism	237
7	Higher education	212
8	communication	187
9	Language learning	156
10	Foreign Language	154

Figure 7. Co-occurrence framework and representation of key terms



Based on the results of mapping and reviewing previous studies, it was found that there were deficiencies in previous research, where the majority of studies conducted tended to focus on themes such as "intercultural communication," "foreign language learning," and "education" within a context heavily influenced by the Chinese or multilingual environment (see Figures and Tables). The keyword "Intercultural Communication" shows the highest total link strength (370), indicating its central position and high level of interconnectedness with other research themes. Other keywords such as "Foreign Language Learning" (305) and "Education" (296) demonstrate also sustained academic interest, but simultaneously suggest saturation in conventional research directions.

Additionally, the term "China" holds a significant position with a total link strength of 290, indicating that most literature places the discourse of intercultural communication and language learning within the framework of the Chinese education system or sociocultural environment. This trend is reinforced by the emergence of keywords such as "Language Education" (252) and "Multilingualism" (237), which are consistently connected to the main themes but often overlook new perspectives or comparative analyses in less explored contexts. This pattern indicates a trend in research traditions that prioritizes large educational systems or linguistically diverse environments, while smaller or non-Western academic contexts receive less attention.

This knowledge structure reveals a clear gap in the distribution of research topics—specifically, the limited exploration of intercultural communication challenges in foreign language learning among Indonesian or Southeast Asian students. This field still seems to lack a systematic comparative framework that examines intercultural adaptation and educational opportunities outside of China, or Western-centric paradigms. Therefore, future research needs to broaden its empirical focus by

integrating contextual and locally rooted pedagogical strategies, particularly in higher education environments in Indonesia involved in Mandarin language instruction.

Theoretical and Practical Gaps in the Study of Mandarin Intercultural Communication

In the evolving field of intercultural communication, particularly in the context of Chinese language education, there are significant conceptual, pedagogical, and methodological gaps that warrant further research. A thorough review of existing literature reveals systematic deficiencies that can guide future inquiries in this domain.

Firstly, the theoretical frameworks underpinning intercultural communication in language education often fail to encapsulate the complexity of culture as fluid and multifaceted. Hoff's exploration of contemporary conceptualizations highlights that traditional models may not adequately address the nuances of interculturality required for the 21st-century classroom (Hoff, 2020). This suggests an urgent need for new models that can encompass diverse cultural identities and practices, enabling educators to adopt a more integrative pedagogical approach. Additionally, Tiurikova emphasizes that a critical gap remains in understanding how cultural differentialism manifests in methodological tools used for assessing intercultural competence (Tiurikova, 2021). This calls for an examination of these tools to ensure they align with contemporary theories, thereby enhancing their relevance and efficacy in the learning environment.

Moreover, pedagogical practices in intercultural language education often lack a cohesive strategy that integrates critical literacy with intercultural competence. Brown and Alford argue for incorporating critical literacy frameworks that promote symbolic competence in learners, thereby enhancing their abilities to engage in intercultural contexts (Brown & Alford, 2023). However, the practical application of such frameworks in the classroom is frequently under-researched. Li's review stresses the necessity for explicit connections between language and intercultural communication in pedagogical practices, advocating for a more robust integration of theoretical insights into everyday teaching methods (Li, 2023). This supports the notion that educators must go beyond conventional practices to incorporate innovative approaches that foster deeper intercultural understanding.

Furthermore, methodological gaps are evident in the ways intercultural experiences are evaluated in educational settings. Schat et al. highlight the challenges in assessing intercultural competence, which is often viewed as a complex, multi-faceted construct (Schat et al., 2021). Current instruments for evaluation may not fully capture the dynamic nature of intercultural interactions, pointing to a need for the development of more comprehensive assessment tools that align with the evolving definitions of competence in language learning. Additionally, the work by Garrett-Rucks indicates that educators are often inadequately trained to facilitate intercultural competence effectively, suggesting a disconnect between theory and practice in teacher education programs (Garrett-Rucks, 2018). This gap highlights the necessity for targeted professional development that addresses intercultural teaching

strategies.

Another significant area for future research lies in virtual mobility and its implications for intercultural communication in language education. Catalano and Barriga discuss how contemporary global mobility necessitates a reevaluation of language teaching practices to prepare students for real-world intercultural interactions, both physically and virtually (Catalano & Barriga, 2021). The intersection of technology and intercultural communication presents a fertile ground for exploring innovative pedagogical strategies that can bridge cultural divides through virtual exchanges.

In conclusion, addressing the identified gaps in conceptual frameworks, pedagogical practices, and methodological approaches is essential for advancing intercultural communication in Chinese language education. Future research should focus on creating adaptable, inclusive models that reflect the complexities of today's multicultural contexts while developing effective assessment tools and enhancing teacher training programs.

CONCLUSION

This study mapped the research trends and challenges in intercultural communication within Mandarin language education from 2020 to 2025 by integrating bibliometric analysis and a systematic literature review. Although global scholarly attention to this topic has increased, the steady decline in publications in 2025 highlights the urgency of redirecting research toward innovative, context-sensitive, and comparative approaches.

Conceptually, current theoretical frameworks remain largely normative and insufficient to capture the fluid and multifaceted nature of cultural identity. Research continues to be dominated by Sinocentric or Anglophone perspectives, leaving limited space for locally grounded narratives, particularly from Southeast Asia. Pedagogically, the integration of intercultural competence into language teaching remains fragmented, with minimal use of critical literacy and few pedagogical models that promote cultural reflection and empathy.

Methodologically, existing tools to assess intercultural competence are inadequate for capturing the dynamic and multidimensional nature of intercultural interactions. Furthermore, the limited training of language teachers in intercultural pedagogy reveals a persistent gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom practice.

To address these gaps, this study recommends the development of adaptive, locally informed pedagogical models and more comprehensive, theoretically aligned assessment instruments. Policymakers and curriculum designers should also prioritize teacher professional development programs that emphasize intercultural communication skills. Future research should expand the inclusion of underrepresented regions and contexts to enrich the global discourse. Strengthening these dimensions will allow Mandarin language education to contribute more effectively to the cultivation

of global competence and to foster meaningful, sustainable cross-cultural engagement.

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