Contemporary Education Frontiers, 2026, Volume 4, Issue 7
https://bbwpublisher.com/journal/CEF
Online ISSN: 3029-1860
Print ISSN: 3029-1879

Chinese Language Education in Iraq: Development, Challenges, and Prospects under the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: Since the establishment of Iraq's first university-level Chinese language program at Salahaddin University in 2019, Chinese language education has gradually gained a place in the country's higher education system. This paper draws on fieldwork conducted in Iraq in 2023, supplemented by publicly available information on developments between 2024 and 2026, and examines the establishment of Chinese language programs, the provision of non-degree training, the development of proficiency testing, and related cultural activities. Particular attention is given to the expansion of university-level Chinese language education from the Kurdistan Region to Baghdad and the growing relationship between Chinese language learning and local employment opportunities. Despite these developments, Chinese language education in Iraq remains constrained by a shortage of qualified local teachers, limited availability of locally relevant teaching materials, inadequate teaching infrastructure, and dependence on Chinese institutional support. Establishing additional Chinese language programs, however, will not resolve the shortage of qualified teachers or the lack of teaching materials suited to Iraqi learners. The study argues that greater emphasis should be placed on developing local teaching capacity, adapting curricula to Iraqi learners, and strengthening connections between language instruction and vocational training. It also considers how digital resources and cooperation among universities, enterprises, and educational institutions could support these efforts within Iraq's specific educational and economic context.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; Iraq; Chinese language education; localization; vocational language education

Online publication: July 26, 2026

1. Introduction

China and Iraq have a long history of contact. The two countries established diplomatic relations on 25 August 1958 and a strategic partnership in December 2015. China is Iraq's largest trading partner, and Iraq is China's third-largest trading partner in the Arab world. Bilateral trade reached a record US$54.22 billion

in 2024, up 9% year on year. In 2025, it stood at US$51.17 billion, of which Chinese exports accounted for US$17.21 billion and imports for US$33.96 billion. As economic ties have grown closer, so has Iraqi demand for people who can speak Chinese [1].

Compared with Southeast Asia, Europe or North America, however, Chinese language education in Iraq began late, and it has received little scholarly attention. Based on first-hand data collected during fieldwork in Iraq in 2023 and on developments over the past two years, this paper analyzes the current state of Chinese language education in the country and the problems it faces, with the aim of informing country-specific approaches to international Chinese language education.

2. Foundations for Chinese language education in Iraq

Several features of Iraq's national context favor the growth of Chinese language education. The first is demography. According to the final results of the 2024 national census, Iraq has a population of about 46.12 million, including roughly 6.37 million in the Kurdistan Region, and people aged 15–64 make up 60.44% of the total. This young population points to a sizeable pool of potential learners of Chinese [2].

In terms of the education system, basic education falls under the Ministry of Education, while higher education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The latter, established in 1970, also oversees Chinese language education. Iraq has more than 100 higher education institutions, roughly half of them public and half private.

Iraq's digital infrastructure has also expanded quickly in recent years. By the end of 2025, the country had about 39.6 million internet users, a penetration rate of 83.8%. However, the availability of internet access does not necessarily mean that universities and students have the equipment or connectivity required for regular online classes [3].

Educational cooperation between the two countries dates back to a cultural cooperation agreement signed in 1975. After the Belt and Road cooperation document was signed in 2015, education became one of the priority areas. Companies have also become involved in training young people. The Zhenhua Oil Scholarship, set up jointly by Zhenhua Oil and the Iraqi Ministry of Oil, has so far funded 59 young Iraqis to pursue master's and doctoral degrees in China [4].

3. Current state of Chinese language education in Iraq

3.1. University degree programs: From the Kurdistan region to the capital

Chinese degree education in Iraq began at the Department of Chinese at Salahaddin University-Erbil. Located in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, the university signed a teacher dispatch agreement with Hanban (now the Center for Language Education and Cooperation of China's Ministry of Education) in 2019 and opened the department within its College of Languages in October of that year. The program lasts four years and leads to a Bachelor of Arts degree.

The department was set up unusually. According to the dean of the College of Languages, the university asked the Chinese consulate to provide and fund teachers, textbooks, classroom equipment such as a language laboratory, and exchange visits to Beijing, and the Chinese side met each of these requests. The department offers 12 courses, including Introduction to Chinese Characters, Introduction to Chinese Grammar, English–Chinese Translation, and Chinese Literature. Fieldwork data show that by 2023 the department had enrolled

two cohorts, with 133 students studying Chinese in total, and that the first cohort graduated in 2023. These graduates have done well in the job market: two received scholarships for further study at Beijing Foreign Studies University and Shanghai International Studies University, and the rest found jobs with Chinese companies operating locally [5].

A further development occurred in August 2025, when Iraq's Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research approved the establishment of a Chinese department at the University of Baghdad. The Iraqi government announced that Chinese language teaching would be incorporated into the higher education system, and at the end of August the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research formally approved a Department of Chinese at the University of Baghdad. It is the first new language department at the university's College of Languages since the college was founded in 1963. Salahaddin University became the first Iraqi university to offer a degree in Chinese in 2019; the Baghdad department is the first Chinese program approved by Iraq's federal government. It was officially inaugurated in December 2025 and admitted 20 students in its first intake [6]. With this step, Chinese degree education has moved beyond the Kurdistan Region into areas under direct federal administration, and from a pilot project driven by China to a formal academic discipline established on Iraq's own initiative. The Iraqi side has been clear about why it wants the program. A spokesperson for the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research said that, with Chinese investment and trade projects in Iraq growing rapidly, the country urgently needs large numbers of local professionals proficient in Chinese in energy, infrastructure, trade and other sectors [7].

3.2. Community-based training and cultural promotion: Small in scale but growing steadily

In December 2021, the Iraqi-Chinese Friendship Association in Baghdad opened Iraq's first Chinese language training center, offering courses at beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. In September 2022, the Cultural Center of the Iraq–China Friendship Association was inaugurated. It runs Chinese classes of six hours per week, attended by about 20 learners.

Iraq still has no Confucius Institute and no Chinese heritage school. As early as 2011, the Chinese side discussed establishing a Confucius Institute with Sichuan University and the University of Baghdad, but the plan did not materialize. Outside universities, Chinese teaching relies mainly on friendship associations. Their programs are small, and learners are mostly people who are interested in Chinese and have enough time and money to pursue it.

3.3. Testing and cultural exchange: Platforms taking shape

In early 2023, HSK test centers were set up at the Iraqi-Chinese Friendship Association in Baghdad and at Salahaddin University. Before then, Iraqi candidates had to travel to neighboring countries such as Turkey or Iran to sit the test. With the new centers, Iraqi students could take the HSK in their own country for the first time.

Chinese language competitions and cultural events are becoming regular fixtures. In June 2026, the Iraq final of the 25th "Chinese Bridge" Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign College Students was held at Salahaddin University, with nine contestants. The Chinese Consul General in Erbil noted that the number of participants and their level of proficiency had risen steadily since the region hosted its first competition in 2022. Events such as China Day, International Chinese Language Day, Spring Festival cultural activities and the "Building Dreams on the Silk Road" Youth Chinese Reading Room have also raised the profile of Chinese in Iraq [8].

3.4. Teaching resources and teachers: Dependent on China, with local capacity emerging

Teaching relies mainly on general-purpose textbooks published in China, such as New Practical Chinese Reader and HSK Standard Course. No textbooks have yet been written locally or co-authored by Chinese and Iraqi scholars. As for digital resources, fieldwork found that MOOCs and micro-lectures were not used systematically. Online teaching took place mainly over Zoom, and teachers often collected YouTube videos themselves as supplementary material.

In 2023, Salahaddin University had only two teachers from China, and the friendship association's training center had only one local teacher, who did not hold an international Chinese language teacher certificate. The Department of Chinese at the University of Baghdad offers a new example of a local teacher. Hanan Mikhail, a lecturer in the department, spent six years in Shanghai, where she studied electrical engineering and received intensive Chinese language training. In class, she switches between Arabic and Chinese to explain tones and everyday expressions. This suggests a workable answer to an earlier problem: teachers from China usually taught in English and could not draw on the students' first language [9].

4. Main challenges

4.1. Too few teachers, and few of them local

Iraq has a small number of Chinese teachers and depends heavily on teachers sent from China. The security situation and regional instability make it difficult for Chinese teachers to work there. Some of them speak neither Arabic nor Kurdish and have to teach through English, which limits what they can achieve in class. Iraq still has no association of Chinese language teachers, and no systematic mechanism for training and certifying local teachers.

4.2. Textbooks poorly suited to local learners

The textbooks in use are all general-purpose. They pay little attention to the specific difficulties faced by speakers of Arabic and Kurdish, and offer little Chinese for specific purposes related to Iraq's energy, infrastructure and trade sectors. Local capacity to develop textbooks is weak, so the materials available do not meet the needs of learners whose main goal is employment.

4.3. Poor teaching conditions and a difficult environment

Classrooms and equipment at some teaching sites are in poor condition. The electricity supply is unreliable, and power cuts in the summer heat frequently interrupt teaching. Internet penetration has risen considerably, but slow connections and high costs still limit the use of good digital resources.

4.4. Heavy reliance on Chinese funding

Teachers, textbooks and equipment for the Department of Chinese at Salahaddin University come mainly from China, and Iraqi investment is limited. This model worked well at the start, but in the long run it raises questions about the program's autonomy and sustainability.

4.5. Low public awareness and uneven motivation

Chinese is still less well known in Iraq than English, French and other traditional foreign languages. Students

have little exposure to Chinese and few opportunities to use it outside class, and some have dropped out for financial reasons. Fieldwork also suggests that some graduates of the first cohort do not yet have the level of Chinese that employers need, which points to a gap between the quality of training and market demand.

5. Prospects

5.1. Make local teacher training the core of a multi-level teacher development system

The Chinese programs at Salahaddin University and the University of Baghdad can serve as a base for selecting outstanding graduates to pursue master's degrees in international Chinese language education in China. One possible approach is to provide scholarships for Iraqi Chinese language graduates who wish to pursue postgraduate study in China and subsequently return to Iraq as teachers. Chinese universities can form one-to-one partnerships with Iraqi universities and strengthen local teachers' professional skills through online training, short courses and classroom observation. The international Chinese language teacher certificate should be introduced step by step, and the founding of an Iraqi association of Chinese language teachers should be encouraged. Priority should be given to sending Chinese teachers who speak Arabic, so that the advantages of bilingual Chinese–Arabic instruction can be put to use.

5.2. Localize textbooks and develop bilingual and specialized materials

Chinese and Iraqi experts could jointly compile textbooks annotated in Arabic and in Kurdish, with exercises aimed at known difficulties such as writing characters and producing tones. Textbooks of Chinese for specific purposes could also be developed for fields that matter to Iraqi industry, including petrochemicals, electric power, construction and international trade, so that what learners study is directly useful at work.

5.3. Integrate Chinese with vocational skills to meet the needs of Chinese companies

Most Iraqi learners study Chinese in order to find work, and Chinese companies in Iraq need staff. This demand is the strongest driving force behind Chinese language education in the country. Universities, Chinese companies and Chinese vocational colleges could cooperate to offer programs such as Chinese + Petroleum Engineering, Chinese + Electrical Technology and Chinese + International Trade, set up internship sites in companies, and train students for specific employers on a contract basis. Universities and companies could also hold regular Chinese corners and recruitment events to ease the move from classroom to workplace. Corporate scholarships could give some priority to students majoring in Chinese, creating a pathway that runs from learning Chinese to further study in China and then to employment with a Chinese company.

5.4. Build digital resources and combine online and face-to-face teaching

With close to 40 million internet users in Iraq, MOOCs and micro-lectures from platforms such as Chinese Plus could be localized into Arabic. Low-bandwidth mobile learning resources that work offline would reduce the disruption caused by power cuts and unstable connections. Where teachers are in short supply, a blended model, in which teachers in China lead online sessions and local teachers provide face-to-face support, could bring good resources to more learners.

5.5. Coordinate promotion among multiple actors to raise public awareness of Chinese

Embassies and consulates, universities, friendship associations, Chinese companies and the media need to work together. They should continue to hold the Chinese Bridge competition, Chinese cultural festivals, summer camps and similar events, and use Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and other platforms popular in Iraq to share, in Arabic and Kurdish, information on learning Chinese and the success stories of graduates. They should also encourage universities where conditions allow to offer Chinese as an elective, and explore ways of gradually bringing Chinese into the national education system. When the time is right, plans for a Confucius Institute or a Chinese Workshop could be revived.

6. Conclusion

Between 2019, when Salahaddin University opened its Department of Chinese, and 2025, when the University of Baghdad received approval for its own, Chinese language education in Iraq went from nothing to a presence in both the north and the capital in only a few years. It is a product of China–Iraq cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative and an important link between the two peoples. It has now reached a critical point, as the emphasis shifts from expansion to quality. The future development of Chinese language education in Iraq will depend on its ability to respond to local educational conditions and labor market demands. Greater attention to teacher training, locally relevant curricula, and vocationally oriented language instruction may help address some of the constraints identified in this study. Digital resources could complement these efforts, particularly in areas where qualified teachers and teaching facilities remain limited. The long-term development of Chinese language education in Iraq will depend not only on continued cooperation with China but also on the ability of Iraqi institutions to train their own teachers, develop appropriate curricula, and maintain stable teaching programs.

Funding

Institute for Economic and Social Development at Shenzhen Polytechnic University Phase III Program (Project No.: 6025310002Q)

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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