

Yan Liang¹, S. Sabigazina^{2*}, Xiaoqiao Shi¹

¹Xinjiang University, Xinjiang, China

²Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

*e-mail: ssabigazy@gmail.com

CURRENT STATUS AND PROSPECTS OF PROFESSIONAL COOPERATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION BETWEEN CHINA AND KAZAKHSTAN

Sino-Kazakh higher education cooperation has undergone more than three decades of development, with its focus progressively shifting away from singular language education toward more diversified and in-depth professional cooperation. However, current academic research predominantly remains at the level of language education, lacking systematic analysis of the development status, operational models, and underlying challenges of professional cooperation, as well as in-depth examination of the inherent transformation trajectory and internal logic. Consequently, these studies fail to adequately address the practical demands of deepening bilateral professional cooperation in higher education.

This study systematically reviews the evolutionary trajectory, primary models, and underlying constraining factors of Sino-Kazakh professional cooperation in higher education. Employing textual analysis, case study analysis, and comparative analysis, the research comprehensively collects and examines relevant policy documents, cooperative development data, existing academic literature, and publicly available information from the official websites of universities in both countries.

The findings reveal that Sino-Kazakh higher education cooperation has evolved through three distinct phases: from scattered language education exchanges and cooperation, to deepening collaboration underpinned by regional education platforms, and subsequently to the transformation of cooperation models through the joint participation of government, industry, and educational institutions. The cooperation has now entered a deepening phase characterized by discipline-led professional engagement. The two sides have established a diversified and synergistic professional cooperation system encompassing seven primary models: Confucius Institutes, exchange student programmes, summer camps, dual-degree programmes, joint educational institutions, Luban Workshops, and joint laboratories. Nevertheless, institutional barriers—including the insufficient alignment of professional curriculum systems, the lack of standardised credit recognition and transfer mechanisms, and the absence of mutual recognition for quality assurance standards—continue to constrain the depth of collaboration.

This study constructs a systematic analytical framework for Sino-Kazakh professional cooperation, expands the research perspective on the transition from language to professional cooperation in bilateral higher education, and clarifies the internal logic underlying each phase of transformation. The research provides practical reference for universities in both countries to optimise cooperation mechanisms, offers decision-making support for resolving common institutional challenges, and lays the groundwork for subsequent digital education cooperation and joint curriculum development.

Keywords: Higher education, Professional cooperation, Collaborative models, Kazakhstan, China.

Янь Лян¹, С. Сабигазина^{2*}, Сяоцяо Ши¹

¹Шыңжаң университеті, Үрімжі, Қытай

²Шанхай шет тілдер университеті, Шанхай, Қытай

*e-mail: ssabigazy@gmail.com

Қытай мен Қазақстан арасындағы жоғары білім саласындағы кәсіби ынтымақтастықтың қазіргі жағдайы мен болашақ перспективалары

Қытай мен Қазақстан арасындағы жоғары білім беру саласындағы ынтымақтастықтың даму тарихы отыз жылдан астам уақытты қамтиды. Осы кезеңде оның негізгі бағыты біртіндеп тек тілдік білім беруден әртараптандырылған әрі терең кәсіби ынтымақтастыққа ауысты. Алайда қазіргі ғылыми зерттеулер негізінен тілдік білім беру деңгейінде қалып, кәсіби ынтымақтастықтың даму жағдайына, іске асырылу модельдеріне және негізгі мәселелеріне жүйелі талдау жасамайды, сондай-ақ оның ішкі трансформациялық логикасы мен даму траекториясын терең қарастырмайды. Соның нәтижесінде мұндай зерттеулер жоғары білім беру саласындағы екіжақты кәсіби ынтымақтастықты тереңдетудің практикалық қажеттіліктерін толық қанағаттандыра алмай отыр.

Осы зерттеуде Қытай мен Қазақстан арасындағы жоғары білім беру саласындағы кәсіби ынтымақтастықтың эволюциялық даму жолы, негізгі модельдері және оны шектейтін ішкі факторлар жүйелі түрде қарастырылады. Зерттеуде мәтіндік талдау, кейстік талдау және салыстырмалы талдау әдістері қолданылды. Сонымен қатар екі елдің тиісті нормативтік-саяси құжаттары, ынтымақтастықтың даму көрсеткіштері, қолданыстағы ғылыми әдебиеттер және университеттердің ресми сайттарында жарияланған ашық ақпараттар кешенді түрде жинақталып, талданды.

Зерттеу нәтижелері Қытай мен Қазақстан арасындағы жоғары білім беру ынтымақтастығының үш негізгі даму кезеңінен өткенін көрсетті: алғашқы кезеңде шашыраңқы тілдік алмасулар мен ынтымақтастық жүзеге асырылса, кейін өңірлік білім беру платформалары негізінде ынтымақтастық тереңдей түсті, ал одан әрі мемлекет, өндіріс және білім беру ұйымдарының бірлескен қатысуы арқылы ынтымақтастық модельдерінің трансформациясы жүзеге асты. Қазіргі таңда ынтымақтастық мамандықтар мен академиялық бағыттарға негізделген кәсіби ықпалдас-тықты тереңдету кезеңіне өтті. Екі тарап Конфуций институттары, студенттер алмасу бағдарламалары, жазғы мектептер, қос диплом бағдарламалары, бірлескен білім беру ұйымдары, Лу Бань шеберханалары және бірлескен зертханалар сияқты жеті негізгі модельді қамтитын әртарап-тандырылған әрі синергиялық кәсіби ынтымақтастық жүйесін қалыптастырды. Сонымен қатар кәсіби оқу бағдарламаларының жеткілікті деңгейде үйлестірілмеуі, кредиттерді өзара тану мен трансферлеудің стандартталған тетіктерінің болмауы, сондай-ақ білім сапасын қамтамасыз ету стандарттарының өзара мойындалмауы сияқты институционалдық кедергілер ынтымақтастық-тың тереңдеуіне әлі де шектеу қояды.

Аталған зерттеу Қытай–Қазақстан кәсіби ынтымақтастығын талдаудың жүйелі теориялық негізін қалыптастырып, екіжақты жоғары білім беру саласындағы тілдік ынтымақтастықтан кәсіби ынтымақтастыққа көшу үдерісінің зерттеу көкжиегін кеңейтеді әрі әрбір трансформация кезеңінің ішкі логикасын айқындайды. Зерттеу нәтижелері екі ел университеттеріне ынтымақ-тастық тетіктерін жетілдіруде практикалық бағдар бере алады, ортақ институционалдық мәсе-лелерді шешуге қатысты шешім қабылдау үдерісіне ғылыми негіз ұсынады және болашақтағы цифрлық білім беру ынтымақтастығы мен бірлескен оқу бағдарламаларын әзірлеуге алғышарт қалыптастырады.

Түйін сөздер: жоғары білім, кәсіби ынтымақтастық, бірлескен модельдер, Қазақстан, Қытай.

Янь Лян¹, С. Сабигазина^{2*}, Сюцяо Ши¹

¹Синьцзянский университет, Урумчи, Китай

²Шанхайский университет иностранных языков, Шанхай, Китай

*e-mail: ssabigazy@gmail.com

Текущее состояние и перспективы профессионального сотрудничества в сфере высшего образования между Китаем и Казахстаном

Сотрудничество Китая и Казахстана в сфере высшего образования развивается уже более трёх десятилетий, при этом его акцент постепенно смещается от исключительно языкового образования к более диверсифицированному и углубленному профессиональному сотрудничеству. Однако существующие академические исследования преимущественно остаются на уровне изучения языкового образования и не содержат системного анализа современного состояния, моделей реализации и ключевых проблем профессионального сотрудничества, а также недостаточно раскрывают внутреннюю логику и траекторию его трансформации. В результате данные исследования не в полной мере отвечают практическим потребностям углубления двустороннего профессионального сотрудничества в сфере высшего образования.

В данном исследовании систематически рассматриваются эволюционная траектория, основные модели и внутренние ограничивающие факторы китайско-казахстанского профессионального сотрудничества в сфере высшего образования. В работе применяются методы текстового анализа, анализа кейсов и сравнительного анализа. Исследование основано на комплексном сборе и анализе соответствующих нормативно-политических документов, данных о развитии сотрудничества, существующей научной литературы, а также открытой информации с официальных сайтов университетов обеих стран.

Результаты исследования показывают, что сотрудничество Китая и Казахстана в сфере высшего образования прошло три основных этапа развития: от разрозненных языковых обменов и сотрудничества – к углублению взаимодействия на основе региональных образовательных платформ, а затем – к трансформации моделей сотрудничества при совместном участии государства, промышленности и образовательных учреждений. В настоящее время сотрудничество вступило в этап углубления, характеризующийся профессиональным взаимодействием, основан-ным на развитии отдельных академических направлений и специальностей. Стороны сформи-

ровали диверсифицированную и синергетическую систему профессионального сотрудничества, включающую семь основных моделей: Институты Конфуция, программы академической мобильности студентов, летние школы, программы двойных дипломов, совместные образовательные учреждения, мастерские Лу Баня и совместные лаборатории. Вместе с тем институциональные барьеры – включая недостаточную согласованность профессиональных учебных программ, отсутствие стандартизированных механизмов взаимного зачёта и трансфера кредитов, а также недостаточное взаимное признание стандартов обеспечения качества образования – продолжают ограничивать глубину сотрудничества.

Данное исследование формирует системную аналитическую рамку китайско-казахстанского профессионального сотрудничества, расширяет исследовательскую перспективу перехода от языкового к профессиональному сотрудничеству в двустороннем высшем образовании и раскрывает внутреннюю логику каждого этапа трансформации. Результаты исследования могут служить практическим ориентиром для университетов обеих стран в оптимизации механизмов сотрудничества, предоставляют основу для выработки решений по преодолению общих институциональных проблем и создают предпосылки для дальнейшего развития цифрового образовательного сотрудничества и совместной разработки учебных программ.

Ключевые слова: высшее образование, профессиональное сотрудничество, модели сотрудничества, Казахстан, Китай.

Introduction

Sino-Kazakh higher education cooperation has traversed more than three decades of deep development. From the 1990s to the early 21st century, bilateral cooperation took language education as its central thread, with institutions such as Lanzhou University and Xi'an International Studies University successively establishing Confucius Institutes in Kazakhstan, fostering vibrant language education and cultural exchanges between the two nations. Following the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, the cooperation focuses gradually shifted toward various professional fields. China University of Petroleum (Beijing), Northwest A&F University, and other Chinese institutions successively established joint training programmes with Kazakhstani universities in energy, agriculture, and other disciplines, while regional education platforms developed rapidly. This marked the commencement of a dual transformation: from language education cooperation to professional education cooperation, and from non-degree, project-based educational cooperation to degree-oriented educational cooperation. Since 2024, the successive establishment of institutional presences in Kazakhstan – including the Northwestern Polytechnical University Almaty Branch and the Beijing Language and Culture University Kazakhstan Branch – has represented a critical step toward the localisation of professional education.

At present, the heads of state of both China and Kazakhstan attach great importance to bilateral diplomacy and cooperation. Educational cooperation, serving as a concrete action to implement the consensus reached by the two heads of state, continues

to elevate the level of strategic alignment. Meanwhile, the pace of regional economic and industrial synergistic development between the two countries has accelerated continuously, with deep linkages in priority sectors such as energy, agriculture, and information technology. Market demand for interdisciplinary talent possessing both cross-cultural competencies and professional technical skills has surged dramatically, providing practical momentum and ample development space for the deepening of Sino-Kazakh professional cooperation in higher education, and driving the emergence of new cooperative forms such as joint university partnerships, technical workshops, and joint laboratories.

Sino-Kazakh higher education cooperation has undergone a comprehensive upgrade: cooperative forms have gradually shifted from short-term, scattered project-based cooperation toward long-term, stable degree-oriented educational cooperation; the cooperative level has evolved from pure cultural and people-to-people exchanges to an integrated development model uniting government, industry, research, and education. Both the depth and coverage of cooperation have been significantly enhanced, demonstrating an overall trajectory toward diversification, systematisation, and high-quality development. Consequently, in-depth analysis and exploration of educational cooperation between the two countries – particularly professional cooperation in higher education – assumes particular importance.

From the perspective of current research, theoretical inquiry in this field lags considerably behind practical developments. Existing research remains largely concentrated on traditional language education, with insufficient systematic analysis of the

actual status, operational rules, implementation effectiveness, and constraining factors of professional cooperation. To a considerable extent, studies focus on the enumeration of developmental cases and superficial data phenomena, while neglecting the excavation of theoretical significance within various practical models and the internal logical threads characterising different developmental stages.

Furthermore, in the rapidly evolving practice of higher education cooperation between the two countries, certain problems have emerged. Institutional challenges – including disparities between the two countries' higher education systems and professional curriculum frameworks, divergent rules for credit recognition and conversion, and independent quality evaluation mechanisms – have become increasingly prominent. This necessitates systematic discussion of the current status and models of cooperation in higher education between the two countries, alongside theoretical breakthroughs, so as to generate replicable cooperative experiences for refinement and promotion.

Traditional analyses of educational cooperation have predominantly proceeded from the inherent laws and characteristics of education itself; while interactions between education and enterprises or policy have been noted, systematic integrative analysis has been relatively scarce. This study establishes a tripartite analytical framework encompassing government, industry, and educational institutions, breaking through the traditional perspective of educational field analysis. This framework enables deeper analysis of educational cooperation cases and surface-level data, more effectively highlighting the internal dynamics driving the transformation of educational cooperation development, and providing a theoretically referential analytical framework for relevant academic inquiry.

This study focuses on the evolution, characteristics, and problem resolution of the transformation of Sino-Kazakh professional cooperation in higher education. The research theme is decomposed into three specific research questions. First, to review the historical trajectory and characteristics of the transformation of Sino-Kazakh professional cooperation in higher education, with particular emphasis on clarifying the internal logic and historical experience of transformations across different periods. Second, to analyse the types and characteristics of Sino-Kazakh professional cooperation in higher education, exploring its effectiveness, problems, and implications in the field of professional cooperation. Third, to thoroughly investigate the educational and

curriculum system disparities and obstacles encountered in advancing cooperation, and to propose corresponding countermeasures and solutions in light of practical development needs. The study employs three research methods: textual analysis, case study analysis, and comparative analysis.

Materials and Methods

The data and materials for this study are derived from three primary sources: first, educational cooperation agreements and strategic policy documents signed by the Chinese and Kazakh governments, encompassing the 1994 Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Academic Qualifications and Degrees and multiple education cooperation documents issued under the Belt and Road Initiative framework since 2013; second, inter-institutional cooperation projects, admissions information, and achievement reports published on the official websites of representative universities, including publicly available materials from institutions such as the Northwestern Polytechnical University Kazakhstan Branch and the Beijing Language and Culture University Kazakhstan Branch; and third, relevant academic literature, research reports, and official statistical data from both domestic and international sources, covering journal articles in Chinese and English, policy documents, and publicly available information from the websites of universities and governments in both countries. This study employs textual analysis, case study analysis, and comparative analysis as its research methods.

This study utilizes three research methods. To address the first research question, which requires reviewing the developmental trajectory of professional cooperation, textual analysis is employed to conduct a diachronic review of educational cooperation agreements, policy documents, and publicly available information from university official websites signed by China and Kazakhstan since the 1994 Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Academic Qualifications and Degrees, identifying the landmark events and policy nodes marking the shift of cooperation focus from language education to professional cooperation across various stages. To address the second research question, which requires summarising the mainstream models of professional cooperation, case study analysis is employed to select seven representative cooperative projects—Confucius Institutes, exchange student programmes, summer camps, dual-degree programmes, joint educational institutions, Luban Workshops, and joint

laboratories – and conduct in-depth analysis of their operational mechanisms, cooperative stakeholders, training models, and actual effectiveness. To address the third research question, which requires thoroughly investigating the specific factors within the education systems that hinder bilateral professional cooperation and proposing improvement measures, comparative analysis is employed to compare the differences between the Chinese and Kazakh degree systems, credit systems, and quality assurance mechanisms, identifying the deep-rooted causes of institutional obstacles such as curriculum system alignment, credit recognition and transfer, and mutual recognition of quality assurance, and proposing targeted improvement pathways drawing on international experience. The study proceeds layer by layer following the logic of historical review, model summarisation, and problem analysis. The data were collected from 30 October 2025 to 1 May 2026.

Literature Review

Early scholarly research predominantly examined the significance of educational cooperation between the two countries and its impact on comprehensive bilateral cooperation. Driven by the synergy between the Belt and Road Initiative and regional development strategies, Sino-Kazakh higher education cooperation has become a vital pillar of bilateral cultural exchange and practical cooperation (Baishan G., et al., 2024). Relevant studies have mapped the policy frameworks underpinning this cooperation (Baishan G., et al., 2024) and traced its historical trajectory (Valeev R.M., et al., 2015; Ponomarenko L., et al., 2021). Utilising quantitative data, research has concretely demonstrated the growth trajectory of student mobility (Gu X., 2024) and the diversification of disciplinary choices. Numerous studies have conducted case analyses on the role of Confucius Institutes, focusing on their promotion of language teaching aligned with industry needs (Syzykbayeva A., et al., 2025). Additionally, considerable research has examined specific challenges in Sino-Kazakh higher education cooperation (Sun X., et al., 2020), progressively observing that bilateral cooperation is undergoing a profound transformation, shifting from broad language and cultural dissemination towards targeted professional synergy (Dauletova G.O., et al., 2020). Some studies have dissected the pragmatic motivational causes and structures underlying Kazakhstani students' pursuit of education in China, excavating the

internal drivers of bilateral educational cooperation from a micro-level bilateral perspective (Serikkaliyeva A.E., et al., 2019). Other research has analysed Kazakhstan's deep strategic considerations in actively deepening university cooperation with China, Türkiye, and the United States – the strategic demand to balance Russian influence through diversified partnerships (Pogorelskaya A.M., et al., 2025). These findings have established a foundation for understanding the dynamics and landscape of Sino-Kazakh educational collaboration.

Subsequent descriptive work on the current status has also been relatively comprehensive. Relevant research has compiled dynamic data on the changing scale of Kazakhstani students pursuing education in China (Serikkaliyeva A.E., et al., 2019), reviewed the overall process of Kazakhstan's integration into the Bologna reform and the actual conditions of local universities joining university alliances (Guliziyi Baishan, 2024), assessed the multi-level developmental status of cooperation (Luo Yin-ing, 2026), and documented the latest progress in branch campus construction (Pogorelskaya A.M., et al., 2025). Moreover, following the formal meeting between the heads of state of China and Kazakhstan in August 2025, Luban Workshops have successively completed scale expansion at L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University and the Academy of Logistics and Transport (Almaty), with their establishment marking the entry of cooperation into a new phase of multi-point deployment.

Setting aside educational cooperation per se, Kazakhstani scholars have in fact conducted relatively thorough research on the internal structure and transformation trajectory of Kazakhstan's higher education system. For instance, research by Narbaev et al. (2025) indicates that the reform trajectory of Kazakhstan's higher education internal structure can be divided into three evolutionary phases: foundational reform from 2014 to 2017, capacity building from 2018 to 2021, and strategic expansion from 2022 to 2024, manifesting a state-led, top-down advancement process that has directly influenced Kazakhstan's institutional preferences and absorptive capacity for external cooperation. (Narbaev et al., 2025) Beyond this, the academic community has produced numerous research findings exploring the characteristics of Kazakhstan's education quality evaluation mechanisms and the overall process through which local universities have adapted to the Bologna reform (Guliziyi Baishan, 2024). Existing literature has also clarified the behavioural logic and structural constraints of Kazakhstani institutions in

participating in international educational cooperation (Lee J.T., et al., 2021). Furthermore, considerable research has addressed the trajectory of higher education internationalisation following Kazakhstan's accession to the Bologna Process. However, existing Sino-Kazakh cooperation research has not incorporated these relevant dimensions into its overall analytical framework, thereby compromising the depth of analysis.

Despite the richness of these achievements, existing research remains insufficient in its systematic theoretical conceptualisation and in-depth integrative analysis of cooperative models. Current research is largely fragmented: some studies focus exclusively on individual case analyses of specific projects (Serikkaliyeva et al., 2019, p. 504; Shenzhen University Medical School, 2025;), whereas others offer only surface-level descriptions of phenomena (Tasbulatova Sh., 2018; Manarbek G., et al., 2024), failing to undertake systematic and phased categorisation of existing cooperative cases from the perspective of professional cooperation transformation. Other studies propose isolated technical solutions, focusing either on student mobility data (Serikkaliyeva A.E., et al., 2019) or assessing multi-dimensional developmental levels (Luo Yining, 2026); however, the majority of these remain confined to the descriptive level of specific projects or superficial institutional phenomena, neither systematically categorising the diversified practices of Sino-Kazakh professional cooperation in higher education nor in-depth elaborating the developmental trajectory and internal logic of the transformation from language education to professional fields. Building upon the accumulation of descriptive findings in existing research, this study focuses on analysing the transformation trajectory and internal logic of Sino-Kazakh professional cooperation in higher education from the perspective of government-industry-education interaction, and thoroughly excavating the institutional roots hindering the sustained deepening of cooperation, thereby providing a theoretically integrative research perspective for the field of transnational educational cooperation.

Results and Discussion

1. Historical Review and Current Status of China-Kazakhstan Higher Education Cooperation

1.1 The Emergence and Foundational Period: Exchange and Cooperation Based on Language Teaching

The history of educational cooperation between China and Kazakhstan can be traced back to the formal establishment of diplomatic relations in the 1990s. The signing of the *Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Mutual Recognition of Academic Qualifications and Degrees* in 1994 removed legal barriers to educational collaboration and institutionalized the process of mutual recognition of academic credentials (Ayitila & Liu Nan, 2019).

However, early educational cooperation models were relatively singular, characterized by a distinct "language-first" approach. This primarily involved the spontaneous cross-border mobility of students seeking language education: Kazakhstani students traveling to China for Chinese language instruction, and Chinese students going to Kazakhstan for Kazakh or Russian language studies. During this period, the endogenous driving force of educational cooperation primarily resided in bilateral educational cooperation underpinned by spontaneous people-to-people exchanges, led by educational institutions. Kazakhstan successively established five Confucius Institutes. Between 2012 and 2017, the scale of Sino-Kazakh student mobility expanded steadily; Kazakhstani students in China were predominantly engaged in language education, while beginning to transition toward advanced degree levels (postgraduate) and a broader range of disciplines. Through the developments during this stage, Chinese universities subsequently launched programmes in the Kazakh language or Russian-Kazakh bilingual studies, while Beijing Foreign Studies University also established the Kazakhstan Research Centre.

1.2 Quality Enhancement and Transformation Phase: Deepening of Professional Cooperation Underpinned by Regional Education Cooperation Platforms

China's Belt and Road Initiative and Kazakhstan's "Bright Path" New Economic Policy exhibit strong strategic synergy, with educational cooperation integrated into the macro-development frameworks of both nations. Regional higher education collaboration platforms continue to proliferate, laying a solid foundation for deeper educational exchange and cooperation.

Established in 2007, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation University (SCO University) has seen its operations become increasingly mature. Through joint cultivation models such as "2+1" or "2+2", Chinese and Kazakhstani universities have achieved mutual recognition of credits and resource

sharing in professional fields including ecology, regional studies, and information technology (Wang Zhengqing et al., 2021). The number of participating Chinese and Kazakhstani institutions within the SCO University grew from 15 and 13 respectively in 2011 (SCO University Charter, 2011) to 48 and 20 by 2025 (SCO University, 2025).

The Silk Road University Alliance, established in 2015, has attracted seven prominent Kazakh institutions, including Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, expanding cooperation into academic disciplines such as energy, economics, trade, and law. It now comprises 128 universities from 31 countries and regions, including 13 Kazakh institutions, such as Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. In 2024, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, and other member institutions signed the Higher Education Cooperation Agreement for SCO Member States within the alliance, reaching a consensus on the inaugural credit recognition project under this framework (Qilu Evening News, 2024). In October 2016, Xinjiang University spearheaded the establishment of the China-Central Asia University Alliance, which now includes 51 institutions from seven countries, such as Tsinghua University, Renmin University of China, and Wuhan University, alongside Central Asian universities such as the National University of Economics of Uzbekistan, Eurasian National University of Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyz National University. The alliance regularly convenes the China-Central Asian Countries University Presidents Forum, providing a platform to advance the exchange of higher education experiences, information sharing, and inter-institutional cooperation between China and Central Asian nations. During the same period, the internationalisation of higher education in both countries and globally entered a new phase, with Kazakhstan formally joining the Bologna Process in 2010. The shared demand for deepening educational exchange and cooperation catalysed the emergence of regional education platforms, which have played a significant role in higher education cooperation between the two nations. The endogenous driving force behind this remained primarily rooted in considerations of the education sector's own developmental needs, as educational cooperation progressively broke through the boundaries of singular language training and extended into professional fields, while the supporting role of regional multilateral cooperation platforms became increasingly prominent.

1.3 Deepening and Integration Phase: Industry-Education Integration and Bidirectional Expansion

After 2017, Sino-Kazakh educational cooperation entered a phase of quality enhancement and rapid development, underpinned by regional education platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Silk Road University Alliance, with the cooperation focus shifting from platform construction toward professional deepening and the integrated development of industry and education. This stage is characterized by the systematic export of vocational and technical education and the formation of an integrated “industry-academia-research-application” model. In October 2023, with strong support from the education ministries of both nations, the inaugural China-Central Asia Higher Education Cooperation Forum was co-hosted by Xi'an Jiaotong University and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, focusing on advancing industry-education integration.

In 2023, the Luban Workshop was officially launched in Kazakhstan. Beyond introducing advanced training facilities, the workshop pioneered a new model for cultivating interdisciplinary talents by combining international Chinese language education with vocational skills. It established a knowledge-producing consortium integrating vocational colleges, research institutions, and training centers, embedding Chinese language learning within authentic industry-based teaching scenarios of Kazakhstan's strategic industries, such as automotive manufacturing, new energy, and modern agriculture (Zhu Xu & Zhang Xinning, 2024). Furthermore, cooperation has begun to extend into core academic disciplines. Through joint laboratories and agricultural technology demonstration zones, both sides have undertaken fruitful research initiatives in high-tech fields including smart agriculture, petroleum exploration, and aerospace (Yue Chuanyang & Wang Zhengqing, 2025).

In 2025, Sino-Kazakh higher education cooperation demonstrated a new characteristic of bidirectional expansion. In May of that year, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University and Nanning Normal University jointly established the Eurasian Institute of Technology in China. The institute received certification from the Ministry of Education of China and was incorporated into the national student enrolment plan; its initial intake offered undergraduate programmes in relevant specialisations, with an enrolment quota set at 300 students, making it the first branch campus established by Kazakhstan in China. According to 2025 data, approximately 3,000 Chinese students were studying in Kazakhstan, while approximately 6,000 Kazakhstani stu-

dents were pursuing education in China, with the scale of bidirectional mobility maintaining a steady expansion trend. In January 2026, China allocated 73 government scholarship places to Kazakhstan for the 2026–2027 academic year, covering multiple degree levels including bachelor's, master's, and doctoral studies—a policy that can provide long-term developmental momentum for bilateral educational cooperation.

Viewed from the perspective of historical transformation and developmental trajectory, the transformation of Sino-Kazakh higher education cooperation has proceeded in parallel with the transformation of higher education development in both countries, ultimately forming an integrated model characterised by government leadership, deep enterprise participation, and proactive university expansion.

2. Primary Models and Characteristics of Sino-Kazakh Professional Cooperation in Higher Education

Deep cooperation between Chinese and Kazakh universities primarily encompasses two models. The first involves the joint development of curricula and training centres, primarily supported by Confucius Institutes, and includes exchange programmes, short-term summer camps, and dual-degree projects among partner institutions. The second is an innovative model based in Kazakhstan, exemplified by Chinese universities establishing branch campuses.

Key stakeholders include Chinese vocational colleges, higher education institutions, international Chinese language education organisations, and Chinese enterprises operating in Kazakhstan. These models each possess distinct advantages and will continue to play important roles in future cooperation.

2.1 Confucius Institute Model

Since the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in 2006, China has established five Confucius Institutes in Kazakhstan by 2017, as detailed in Table 1. To this day, Confucius Institutes remain a vital vehicle for specialised higher education cooperation between China and Kazakhstan. Beyond delivering foundational Chinese language instruction, they serve as a window for the Kazakhstani public to understand Chinese culture, playing an increasingly significant role in cultural and educational exchange. With evolving times, Confucius Institutes have progressively bridged Chinese enterprises with Mandarin-proficient talent. For instance, the Confucius Institute at K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University in Aktobe Region offers specialised courses like Business Chinese and Petrochemical Chinese tailored to the local energy sector. Similarly, the Confucius Institute at Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages in Karaganda has launched “Chinese + Technology” programmes aligned with the Central Industrial Zone, emphasising applied skills development.

Table 1
Establishment of Confucius Institutes in Kazakhstan

Name	Chinese Partner Institution	Established
Eurasian University Confucius Institute	Xi'an International Studies University	20 December 2006
Confucius Institute an der Kazakh National University (formerly the Chinese Language Centre)	Lanzhou University	23 February 2009
Confucius Institute at K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University, Aktobe Region	Xinjiang University of Finance and Economics	24 June 2011
Confucius Institute at Abylkas Saginov Karaganda Technical University	Shihezi University	27 November 2012
Confucius Institute at Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages	Southwest University	25 October 2016

2.2 Exchange Student Programme

The exchange student model represents one of the most fundamental and flexible forms of international educational cooperation. Numerous universities in China and Kazakhstan have established ex-

change programmes, typically involving reciprocal waivers of tuition and accommodation fees for an equal number of students. For instance, Xinjiang University and Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages conduct an-

nual student exchange initiatives: Kazakhstani students study the Chinese language in China, while Chinese students learn Russian and Kazakh in Kazakhstan and undertake Chinese language teaching practice at Confucius Institutes.

Beyond traditional geographically-based collaboration, language exchange programmes between Chinese and Kazakhstani universities have expanded into professional fields such as medicine, law, and energy in recent years. For instance, Shenzhen University and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University launched a doctoral and young scientist exchange programme in medicine in 2024, facilitating substantive research collaboration through joint laboratories (Shenzhen University School of Medicine, 2025). Northwest University and the M. Narikbayev KAZGUU University have established a regular tuition-waiver exchange mechanism, focusing on cultivating legal and humanities professionals with international perspectives (Northwest University International Cooperation Department, 2025). Furthermore, Harbin Institute of Technology has selected postgraduate students specializing in energy to visit Kazakhstan for exchanges via the SCO platform (School of Energy Science and Engineering, Harbin Institute of Technology, 2025), while Jiangxi Science and Technology Normal University has established a dedicated exchange programme for information engineering students (Office of International Cooperation and Exchange, JSTNU, 2025). These exchange initiatives are closely aligned with the strategic requirements of both nations in the energy and engineering sectors.

2.3 Summer Camp Model

Summer camps are short-term programmes traditionally centred on cultural and linguistic immersion, though they may also incorporate specialised internships, typically lasting two to four weeks. Beyond university-level partnerships, these programmes often receive financial support from the Chinese government. Currently, a significant num-

ber of Kazakhstani student groups travel to China annually through these initiatives. Kazakhstan also offers various summer programmes; however, due to insufficient promotion in China, few Chinese students participate. Additionally, many universities host “summer school” initiatives focusing on thematic exchanges within specific disciplines. These aim not only to enrich participants’ cultural experiences but also to provide insights into disciplinary development related to industrial progress in both nations.

2.4 Dual-Degree Collaborative Education Programmes

The “3+1” or “2+2” dual-degree model is based on joint cultivation, where both partners collaboratively develop curricula and implement mutual credit recognition. Faculty support and training involve the reciprocal exchange of core faculty members to teach foundational professional courses or the adoption of a “floating faculty” model. A joint teaching steering committee is also established to conduct regular quality assessments, ensuring that academic standards meet the requirements of both institutions. Upon graduation, students who fulfil the requirements of both universities are awarded diplomas and degrees from both institutions.

According to institutional websites, universities currently offering dual-degree programmes include: Northwestern Polytechnical University and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (NPU, 2025); Nankai University and L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Nankai University School of Economics, 2025); Northwest A&F University and S. Seifullin Kazakh Agrotechnical Research University (Sina Finance, 2024); Wuhan University and Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages (Wuhan University, 2014); and City University of Hong Kong (CityU) and Kazakh National Research Technical University named after K.I. Satbayev (currently Satbayev University) (Satbayev University, 2025), among others.

Table 2
List of Sino-Kazakh Dual Degree Collaborative Institutions

No.	Chinese Institution	Kazakh Institution	Collaborative Programme	Established in
1	Northwestern Polytechnical University	Al-Farabi Kazakh National University	Artificial Intelligence	2023 (Branch Campus Commencement)
2	Nankai University	L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University	1. Economics (Digital Economy and Industrial Innovation) 2. International Business (Belt and Road Economic and Trade Cooperation)	2025

Continuation of the table

No.	Chinese Institution	Kazakh Institution	Collaborative Programme	Established in
3	Northwest A&F University	S. Seifullin Kazakh Agrotechnical Research University	Food Science and Engineering	2023
4	Wuhan University	Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages	International Relations, Foreign Language & Literature	Agreement signed in July 2012, officially launched in March 2013
5	City University of Hong Kong	Kazakhstan National Technical University	Undergraduate: Engineering Management, Computer Science, etc. Postgraduate: Engineering Management, Finance, etc.	2024 (Programme Commencement)

2.5 Cooperative University Model

Beyond professional cooperation, China and Kazakhstan are also exploring the joint establishment of higher education institutions. In October 2023, Northwestern Polytechnical University (NPU) of China partnered with Al-Farabi Kazakh National University to establish the NPU Kazakhstan Branch, marking China's first high-level university branch in Central Asia. The branch initially offered Master's degree programmes in Materials Science and Engineering, Information and Communication, and Computer Science and Technology; in 2024, an undergraduate programme in Artificial Intelligence was added (Northwestern Polytechnical University Kazakhstan Branch, 2025).

In July 2024, the Kazakhstan Branch of Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU), jointly established by BLCU and Astana International University, was officially inaugurated. It plans to offer Chinese language degree programmes spanning preparatory, undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels. Under this operational model, the Kazakh side provides the infrastructure and facilities, while the Chinese side supplies teaching support, including faculty and curricula. Currently, 100 students are enrolled (Kazakhstan Branch Campus – BLCU, 2025). The establishment of joint higher education institutions represents a critical step toward the localised development of professional cooperation in higher education between the two nations.

2.6 Luban Workshop Model

Named after the ancient Chinese master craftsman Lu Ban, the "Luban Workshop" initiative aims to strengthen vocational education exchange and cooperation between the two nations. To date, three Luban Workshops have been established in Kazakhstan. On December 9, 2023, the first Luban Workshop in Kazakhstan, jointly established by Tianjin

Vocational University and East Kazakhstan Technical University, commenced trial operations. It initially offered a programme in Transport Equipment and Technology, featuring four practical training areas: vehicle maintenance, fuel-powered automotive systems, new energy vehicles, and intelligent connected vehicles. The workshop currently has an enrolment of over 400 students (Luban Workshop, 2024).

On August 30, 2025, during President Tokayev's visit to China for the 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit, the second and third Luban Workshops in Kazakhstan were formally inaugurated. The second workshop, a collaboration between Tianjin Vocational University and L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, focuses on four domains: deep learning, machine learning, data mining, and industrial internet security (Tianjin Municipal Education Commission, 2025). The third workshop, established by Urumqi Vocational University and the Academy of Logistics and Transport (Almaty), concentrates on intelligent logistics training (China News Service, 2025).

2.7 Joint Laboratory Model

In November 2024, the China-Kazakhstan Joint Laboratory for Animal Husbandry, co-established by Kozybayev University (North Kazakhstan University) and Northwest A&F University, was inaugurated (Shaanxi Provincial People's Government, 2024). In June 2025, the inauguration ceremony for the China-Central Asia Arid Zone Agriculture "Belt and Road" Joint Laboratory (in preparation) was held at the S. Seifullin Kazakh Agrotechnical Research University in Kazakhstan.

This joint laboratory, co-established by Northwest A&F University and the Kazakh National Agrarian University, focuses on arid zone agriculture. It conducts comprehensive collaboration

encompassing joint research and development, applied demonstrations, technical training, and talent cultivation across six key research areas: crop breeding, efficient crop production, modern animal husbandry technology, agricultural water-saving irrigation, saline-alkali land remediation, and food processing and safety (Shaanxi Provincial People's Government, 2025). Additionally, China University of Petroleum has established a representative office in Almaty to advance Sino-Kazakh cooperation in petroleum exploration and talent development.

From Confucius Institutes, summer camps, and exchange programmes to dual-degree initiatives, branch campuses, Luban Workshops, and joint laboratories, the models of professional cooperation in Sino-Kazakh higher education are undergoing continuous transformation. This evolution signifies that bilateral educational collaboration is steadily advancing from short-term language training and project-based partnerships toward long-term, systematic degree education and the development of academic communities.

3. Key Challenges in Sino-Kazakh Higher Education Cooperation

3.1 Differences in Educational Systems and Professional Curriculum Frameworks

Although both China and Kazakhstan employ a three-tier degree system consisting of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, differences remain in educational programmes, curriculum content, and standards for learning outcomes. These disparities hinder the full mutual recognition of degrees and the depth of joint talent cultivation. Since 2000, Kazakhstan has actively pursued an internationalisation strategy, formally joining the Bologna Process in 2010 to achieve alignment with the European higher education system. Nevertheless, disparities persist between the two countries' educational systems in the specific details of professional curriculum design and talent training programmes.

From the perspective of specific higher education strategies, Kazakhstan attaches importance to multilingual education reform and regional collaborative development, whereas China relies on the construction of Project 211, Project 985, and Double First-Class universities to build its global competitive capacity, with the state placing greater emphasis on technology-driven development and the attraction of high-end talent. These divergent developmental strategies constitute the deep-rooted causes underlying three major cooperative obstacles in the Sino-Kazakh cooperation process: the alignment of curriculum systems, credit recognition and

transfer, and mutual recognition of quality standards (Dalelova et al., 2024).

The two countries also exhibit certain structural differences in their disciplinary and research layouts. Kazakhstan's research output is concentrated in the two major fields of natural sciences and engineering, which together account for 82.1%, while the proportions of medicine, social sciences, humanities, and agricultural sciences remain relatively low. This singular disciplinary structure has resulted in relatively weak curriculum resources and faculty reserves in fields such as medicine, law, and management in Kazakhstan, a situation that directly constrains the foundational conditions for conducting equitable and in-depth cooperation between China and Kazakhstan in these domains (Narbaev et al., 2025).

3.2 Divergence in Credit Accumulation and Transfer Systems

Numerous scholars consider the credit system to be one of the primary barriers to student mobility (Tasbulatova, S., 2018). The higher education credit system in Kazakhstan is primarily aligned with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), exhibiting systematic differences from China's credit calculation framework. Chinese higher education credits are calculated solely on the basis of classroom teaching hours, generally with 16 classroom teaching hours equalling one credit, whereas the European Union credit calculation incorporates students' independent study hours. Consequently, when the two countries engage in professional cooperation, the specific credit hours of Chinese universities appear relatively low and differ substantially from the European Union system. This necessitates separate calculations for credit conversion between universities in the two countries, as well as case-by-case approval from each participating institution, leading to complex procedures and inconsistent standards. Education authorities of both nations should spearhead the development of implementation rules for a Bilateral Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (BCTS) to clarify details regarding core curricula, grade conversion, and credit transfer. Furthermore, stakeholders could leverage digital technologies such as blockchain to establish platforms for the mutual recognition of academic qualifications, enabling instant verification, secure authentication, and the safe sharing of transcripts and certificates.

3.3 Independent Quality Assurance and Accreditation Mechanisms

Programmatic evaluations of Chinese higher education institutions are primarily organized by the

Ministry of Education of China, whereas Kazakhstan utilizes a dedicated national accreditation agency. Since joining the Bologna Process, Kazakhstan's quality assurance system has become increasingly aligned with European standards. This signifies that the mutual recognition of quality assurance between China and Kazakhstan requires not only the coordination of domestic standards in both countries, but also the accommodation of third-party effects arising from the deep integration of Kazakhstan's standards with the European system. Discrepancies in educational outcome evaluation standards between the two nations pose challenges for the comprehensive mutual recognition of academic qualifications. For instance, doctoral degrees conferred by Chinese universities ranked outside the top 300 in the QS World University Rankings are subject to a re-examination of the doctoral thesis upon the student's return to Kazakhstan, along with the requirement to publish an additional Scopus-indexed paper for degree accreditation. This has also dampened the enthusiasm of Kazakhstani students for pursuing doctoral studies in China.

Both nations could promote pilot joint reviews by quality assurance agencies or the exchange of observers. Commercial cooperative education models and online education could also be addressed by negotiating a specific Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cross-Border Higher Education Quality Assurance Cooperation between China and Kazakhstan, building upon the WTO General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and existing bilateral education cooperation agreements (Shi Wenjie, 2022).

4. Prospects for Specialised Cooperation in Higher Education between China and Kazakhstan

4.1 Expanding the Scope of Professional Cooperation

Higher education in China has undergone more than 70 years of transformation since 1949. The scale of the sector has reached 48.46 million students, with a disciplinary structure covering twelve broad categories: philosophy, economics, law, education, literature, history, science, engineering, agriculture, medicine, management, and arts (Ministry of Education of China, 2025). Furthermore, five Chinese institutions are ranked among the top 100 in the QS World University Rankings.

Kazakhstan's higher education sector has also experienced rapid development in recent years. According to the latest data from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Kazakhstan for the 2024-2025 academic year, the total enrollment nationwide has exceeded 680,000, including more

than 35,000 international students from 88 countries (The Astana Times, 2025). Twenty Kazakh institutions are featured in the 2026 QS World University Rankings, with Al-Farabi Kazakh National University securing the 163rd place globally and maintaining its status as the top-ranked institution in Central Asia. Its strengths extend beyond traditional disciplines such as petroleum engineering, energy management, law, and regional studies, showing significant growth potential in cutting-edge fields like computer science and artificial intelligence. Although the two countries exhibit certain disparities in disciplinary layout, they share a consistent pursuit of educational modernisation from an overarching perspective. The synergistic development of the regional economies of both countries also demands that the two sides develop a greater number of regionally co-built specialisations applicable to bilateral economic development, thereby indicating substantial room for expansion in higher education cooperation.

Relevant stakeholders can collaboratively design talent cultivation programmes, jointly develop modular courses, and establish unified professional standards or competency frameworks in priority sectors urgently needed for Sino-Kazakh industrial cooperation. Progress has already been made in this regard. For instance, the SCO University has established specialised training forums in fields such as regional studies and energy. Similarly, the Silk Road University Alliance (UASR) regularly convenes international academic and teaching seminars to develop standards for curriculum compatibility and joint cultivation in specific sectors such as energy and chemical engineering. Furthermore, as cooperation continues to deepen, it is anticipated that more effective alignment and conversion solutions will emerge for the structural differences between the two countries' educational and professional curriculum systems.

4.2 Enhancing Scientific Research Collaboration

The development of professional fields within higher education worldwide is currently driven by scientific and technological advancement, with the cultivation of leading scientific and technological talent being paramount to such progress. Universities are increasingly becoming the forefront of national scientific and technological innovation.

Currently, Kazakhstan has established extensive cooperative education and dual-degree programmes with universities in 23 countries, successfully attracting several internationally renowned universi-

ties to establish branch campuses, thereby demonstrating broad international collaboration across disciplines. Looking ahead, both governments should consider expanding the development of joint laboratories on the basis of professional cooperation, establishing joint research funds for priority areas, and encouraging enhanced exchanges between scientists and scholars in key fields. Dedicated funding programmes should be established to harness scientific and technological progress to drive further disciplinary advancement.

4.3 Integrating Government-University-Industry Collaboration

Professional cooperation in higher education between China and Kazakhstan requires not only concerted efforts within the academic sectors but also the dismantling of institutional barriers between government, universities, and industry. It is essential to establish a unified and synergistic “government-university-industry” synergy mechanism to promote industry-education integration and the integration of science and education.

Throughout this process, governments must innovate education systems to remove barriers to collaboration. Building upon existing regional university alliances, they should establish long-term cooperation mechanisms that enable member institutions to engage in joint programmes, student exchanges, and credit recognition; develop educational practice bases; and foster research collaboration, shared research platforms, academic exchanges, and the sharing of library and information resources. Higher education institutions must continuously optimize their talent development schemes and curriculum frameworks, establishing unified course syllabuses while strengthening university-industry collaboration. Meanwhile, enterprises should proactively participate in talent cultivation by partnering with universities to establish specialized internship and training bases. Continuous information exchange must be maintained among all stakeholders, including governments, institutions, and enterprises.

Conclusion

This study systematically reviews the developmental trajectory of more than three decades of Sino-Kazakh professional cooperation in higher education, constructs a systematic analytical framework encompassing government, industry, and education, summarises seven cooperative models, and analyses three institutional obstacles – namely, the alignment of curriculum systems, credit recogni-

tion and transfer, and mutual recognition of quality assurance mechanisms. The research categorizes seven primary models of professional cooperation, including Confucius Institutes, student exchanges, dual-degree programmes, and Luban Workshops. Collaboration has evolved from early language teaching exchanges to a deepening phase characterized by specialized educational and technical support and industry-education integration. However, systemic challenges remain, such as the insufficient alignment of professional curricula, the lack of standardized credit transfer mechanisms within the sector, and the absence of mutual recognition for quality assurance standards. These issues constrain the depth of talent cultivation and impede the mobility of professionals.

From a practical application perspective, this study offers recommendations and identifies key development priorities for future Sino-Kazakh professional cooperation in higher education. Both nations should broaden their professional cooperation domains, design specialized joint cultivation programmes centered on industrial collaboration, intensify scientific research collaboration, and integrate government-university-industry partnerships. These measures will ensure that educational cooperation better caters to industrial development needs, thereby providing a practical reference for educational authorities, universities, and enterprises in both nations.

Beyond its practical value, the academic contribution of this study lies in its systematic categorization of seven models of professional cooperation, providing a theoretical framework for future research. Furthermore, the tripartite theoretical analytical framework integrating government, industry, and education established in this study also breaks through the fragmented and case-specific tendencies of previous relevant research. Future research could further investigate digital education cooperation, examine the practical implementation of jointly developed programmes, or track the career trajectories of graduates. Such follow-up studies would deepen the scholarly community’s understanding of the tangible outcomes and practical impacts of transnational professional cooperation.

Reflecting on more than three decades of partnership, Sino-Kazakh higher education cooperation is progressively evolving from a model of “language-centric utility” toward one of “substantive professional engagement.” Currently, bilateral cooperation has fostered a dynamic landscape of multi-dimensional development, guided by govern-

ment initiatives, spearheaded by higher education institutions, and featuring deep enterprise participation. Educational cooperation between the two countries will also provide more solid support in terms of professional talent for building comprehensive exchanges and cooperation between the two nations.

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Author Contributions

Shi Xiaoqiao: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft.

Sabigazina Saule: Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Visualization, Writing – Review & Editing.

Liang Yan: Supervision, Funding Acquisition, Project Administration, Writing – Review & Editing.

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Information about authors:

Liang Yan – PhD, Associate Professor, International Culture Exchange College, Xinjiang University (Xinjiang, China, e-mail: 002293@xju.edu.cn).

Saule Sabigazina – Visiting Researcher, Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies, Shanghai International Studies University (Shanghai, China, e-mail: ssabigazy@gmail.com).

Shi Xiaoqiao – Postgraduate student, International Culture Exchange College, Xinjiang University (Xinjiang, China, e-mail: 107552502880@stu.xju.edu.cn).

Авторлар туралы мәлімет:

Лян Янь – PhD, доцент, Шыңжаң университеті, Халықаралық мәдени алмасу институты (Шыңжаң, Қытай, e-mail: 002293@xju.edu.cn).

Сабигазина Сауле – қонақ зерттеуші, Шанхай халықаралық зерттеулер университеті, Ресей, Шығыс Еуропа және Орталық Азия институты (Шанхай, Қытай, e-mail: ssabigazy@gmail.com).

Ши Сюцяо – магистрант, Шыңжаң университеті, Халықаралық мәдени алмасу институты (Шыңжаң, Қытай, e-mail: 107552502880@stu.xju.edu.cn).

Сведения об авторах:

Лян Янь – PhD, доцент, Институт международного культурного обмена Синьцзянского университета (Синьцзян, Китай, e-mail: 002293@xju.edu.cn).

Сабигазина Сауле – приглашённый исследователь, Институт России, Восточной Европы и Центральной Азии Шанхайского университета иностранных языков (Шанхай, Китай, e-mail: ssabigazy@gmail.com).

Ши Сюцяо – магистрант, Институт международного культурного обмена Синьцзянского университета (Синьцзян, Китай, e-mail: 107552502880@stu.xju.edu.cn).

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