

THE FORMATION OF INTERCULTURAL IDENTITY AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CHINA: A GENERATIVE STRUCTURALISM PERSPECTIVE

XueFang Zhou

School of International Education, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing 312000, Zhejiang, China.

Abstract: The identification of international students with Chinese culture is formed in a dynamic way and also reconstructed during cross-cultural interaction, and it shows some typical characteristics of intercultural identity. This study is based on Bourdieu's generative structure theory and the "Field-Capital-Habitus" framework. It uses qualitative research method, and carries out one year follow up interviews and observations with 10 international students from 8 countries. The research finds that when international students enter into the education field in China, they experience the process of accumulating Chinese language capital, dealing with culture shock, facing stereotypes, and adjusting their own habits, so as to gain an advantage in academic competition. They gradually absorb and combine Chinese culture from surface level to middle level and then to deep level. The study shows that the experience of studying in China is an important external power for constructing cultural identity of international students toward Chinese culture. Universities should strengthen the Chinese learning environment by improving curriculum design, building cross cultural support system, enhancing teachers intercultural ability, and giving different guidance, so as to continuously promote the high quality development of international Chinese education.

Keywords: Generative structuralism; International students in China; Cultural identity; International Chinese education

1 INTRODUCTION

Cultural identity theory was proposed by the American psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson in the 1950s and was subsequently widely applied in research across the fields of society, history, politics and culture. Cultural identity refers to the degree to which an individual's cognition, emotion and behaviour tend to align with those of the majority of members within a particular cultural group [1], reflecting that individual's sense of belonging to that culture or ethnic group [2]. For international students, cultural identity denotes a psychological tendency and emotional attitude of acceptance, recognition and belonging towards a heterogeneous culture different from that of their native language. In the process of international Chinese language education, overseas students in China continuously interact with the social and cultural context, while their native-language culture and Chinese culture undergo constant overlap, accumulation and expansion. As contact and collision between the two cultures gradually deepen, the experiences and knowledge they can share continue to increase, and their originally independent frameworks of meaning progressively converge and interconnect; accordingly, international students' cultural identity also changes and is reconstructed. When international students are able to transcend ethnocentrism and appreciate and identify with Chinese culture from an egalitarian perspective, intercultural identity can then emerge [3].

Previous studies show that learners who have identification with target culture usually have higher level in second language, while those without it often have lower level [4]. For each 1% increase of a country's identification with Chinese culture, the number of students from this country who study in China will increase about 0.116% [5]. International students who have studying experience in China show obviously higher identification with Chinese culture compared with those who do not have such experience [6]. The identification of international students with Chinese culture can not only improve their Chinese language learning result, but also deepen their understanding and recognition of Chinese wisdom and Chinese solution. This is helpful for China to build positive international image, create good external development environment, and enhance soft power and competitiveness.

At present, the research mainly pays attention to the relation between cultural identity construction of international students and Chinese language learning, and also focuses on the present situation and development trend of international students' identification with Chinese culture. However, the in-depth research about how international students construct their identification with Chinese culture is still not enough, and there is lack of full understanding about the characteristics in this construction process. By analyzing the interaction between international students and their social and cultural context and giving detailed description about the process and characteristics of constructing cultural identity with Chinese culture, this study finds some existing problems and puts forward corresponding strategies. It also provides practical paths with strong operability for the sustainable development of international Chinese education.

2 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study uses qualitative research method and takes international students in China as the research object. It aims to explore the change and reconstruction process of cultural identity of international students, and analyze the role and influence of the interaction between individual students and social environment in constructing their identification with Chinese culture.

2.1 Generative Structuralism Theory

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu thinks that problems should be considered from relational perspective. He developed the theory of social practice by using some important concepts, such as “Field”, “Habitus”, and “Capital” [7]. This theoretical framework is also called generative structuralism, and it shows the dialectical interaction between objective social structure (Field) and the agents (Habitus) who produce social practice. Bourdieu believes that each field has its own value and also has different regulating principles. Field is a kind of space which is defined by these regulating principles, and in this space, actors compete according to their position, in order to change or maintain the scope or form of the space [7]. This theory can be used to explain the Chinese language learning and cultural identity construction of international students in the field of studying in China.

2.1.1 Theoretical concepts and main components

Bourdieu pointed out that field is a social space full of power relation and competition, and the position of actor in the field will decide their behavior and also their way of thinking [7]. Field is similar to a game, and different games have different rules and requirements. The actors in the game are limited by these rules, and these rules guide their actions, and also slowly shape their habitus. Habitus is not only simple habit, but a more complicated tendency formed in socialization process, including taste, belief, value and behavior pattern of the actor. Actors can adjust their habitus according to different field, and this can be seen in language, culture, idea and behavior. Field shapes habitus, and habitus also constructs field in return.

Bourdieu also thinks that capital is not equally distributed, so the field is full of competition for capital, and actors compete in the field based on how much capital they have and what kind of capital structure they have [7]. In modern society, class difference still exists, and different classes have different habitus, and also have different amount and type of capital, so they take different position. Because international students in China come from different cultural background, they have different level of economic capital, cultural capital and social capital, and this influences their position in the field of study in China.

2.1.2 Cultural capital contestation and intercultural identity construction

Within the field of study in China, there is a complex competition between the native language and culture of international students and Chinese language and culture, also among international students themselves, and also between students and their Chinese teachers. Chinese language and culture become an important kind of capital in this field competition, and international students join in this competition by accumulating Chinese cultural capital. To accumulate Chinese cultural capital becomes very necessary for international students to get advantage in the competition.

In this process, the interaction and collision of different cultures continue to appear, and international students gradually understand that confrontation only brings negative influence, while cooperation and negotiation can bring mutual benefit. In order to effectively accumulate the needed field capital and keep a relatively advantageous position in the competition, students follow the rules of the new field, try to put aside differences, look for common points, and become more inclusive. Their original habitus is gradually integrated, leading to partial internalization, thus constructing a certain level of intercultural identity, which includes identification with Chinese language and culture.

2.1.3 Capital and habitus in intercultural practice

Bourdieu believed that “capital” is dependent on the “field,” and its value can only be realized within a specific field; the generation of “habitus” is determined by “capital” and reflects the state of that capital; “capital” in different “fields” can be converted [7]. The more diverse a person’s intercultural experience, the stronger their ability to practice within intercultural environments. International students transition from their native language field to the field of study in China. In this intercultural environment, the enduring characteristics of their habitus may initially cause discomfort, but the agency within their habitus will prompt them to quickly adjust their mindset. They will leverage their existing habitus and capital advantages to effectively accumulate the new language and cultural capital required in the field and alter their position within the new field.

2.2 Research Subjects

Due to individual differences, not all international students in China are able to construct an identification with Chinese culture. Successful international students’ cultural identity development goes through stages of frustration, change, and construction, while unsuccessful students maintain a singular identification with their native culture due to failure in identity construction.

This study uses purposive sampling method to carry out qualitative research on the cultural identity change of 10 international students. The 10 students come from 8 countries, including Italy (Europe), Yemen (Middle East), South Korea (East Asia), Uzbekistan (Central Asia), Turkey (Eurasian border), Bolivia (South America), Cameroon (Africa), and Russia (Eurasia). Among them, 6 students are male and 4 students are female. There are 7 language students and 3 degree students. The shortest time in China is 1 year of the Italian student, and the longest time is 12 years from the

Yemeni student. This study includes international students from four continents, which are Europe, Asia, Africa and South America, and also covers different cultural circles, such as East Asian culture, Islamic culture, Eastern Orthodox culture and Latin culture. This kind of diversity in country distribution can help to observe the similarities and differences in the intercultural identity construction path of international students with different cultural background. The basic information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Basic Information of Research Participants

ID	Nationality	Gender	Student Type	length of stay in China	Native language
IM01	Italian	Male	Language program students	One year	Italian
YF02	Yemen	Female	Language program students	Four years	Arabic
KM03	South Korea	Male	Degree-seeking students	Two years	Korean
UM04	Uzbekistan	Male	Language program students	Three years	Uzbek
TM05	Turkey	Male	Degree-seeking students	Five years	Turkish
BF06	Bolivia	Female	Language program students	Four years	Spanish
CF07	Cameroon	Female	Language program students	Two years	English
YM08	Yemen	Male	Language program students	Twelve years	Arabic
UM09	Uzbekistan	Male	Language program students	Two years	Uzbek
RF10	Russia	Female	Degree-seeking students	Three years	Russian

Note: In the participant code, the first letter represents the initial letter of the participant's home country, the second letter indicates gender, and the number denotes the sequence number.

2.3 Data Collection

This study primarily uses interviews and observation to collect data. Over the course of a year, the study conducted 2-3 interviews with the 10 international students. The study also conducted non-participant observations of the students' daily academic and social lives and collected images and text from their social media platforms, such as WeChat Moments, as supplementary materials. These observations and textual data were used as evidence for the research. The primary data were analyzed using grounded theory's three-level coding method [8]. After repeated readings of the original data, category analysis was applied to abstract 8 categories, and attributes and dimensions were established. From the perspective of Bourdieu's generative structuralism theory, the core category of the study was established as "interaction between the individual and the external environment," as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Example of the Coding Process

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Open Coding			Raw Data
		Category	Attributes/ Dimensions	Labeling	
Interaction Between the Individual and the External Environment	Learning Chinese	Overcoming Obstacles	Difficulty (high-low)	Language Barrier	Because I couldn't understand, I often stayed in my dorm even during holidays (CF07). In my first year in China, not knowing Chinese was really tough for me (UM09). After I learned a little Chinese, I started enjoying taking part in all kinds of school activities (IM01). Learning Chinese made my life a lot easier. I often go with my uncle to help him with business deals (YM08). When I first got to China, I only had other international students as friends. Later I made some Chinese friends (UM04). After coming to study in China, I've made many friends of different ages, genders, and nationalities. I really love it (BF06).
	Overcoming Culture Shock		Practice (more-less)	Chinese Accumulation	
		Obtaining Support	Quantity (more-less)	Making Friends	

Degree (large-small)	Receiving Help	My Chinese teacher has been very good to me and helped me a lot (YF02). The school set up a language partner for us. He often studies with me and helps me out with many problems (TM05).
-------------------------	-------------------	--

3 FINDINGS

Western scholars regard the process of differentiating, selecting, and accepting cultural elements based on existing cultural foundations as “cultural identity,” which they believe involves the emotional and psychological convergence of an individual with others, groups, or cultural figures they imitate. This process is considered a crucial starting point for both cultural conflict and cultural integration. They argue that the product of communication between different cultures is intercultural identity, which, although it does not eliminate differences and conflicts, can alleviate contradictions and make disputes more reconcilable [5].

Xu Jialu proposed a three-tier classification of culture: surface culture (referring to the culture embedded in daily life such as food, clothing, housing, and transportation), intermediate culture (the culture between material and spiritual realms, including customs, systems, etiquette, laws, and religion), and deep culture (the worldview, values, ethics, aesthetics, etc., that permeate and influence surface and intermediate cultures) [9]. The data analysis in this study shows that the 10 international students displayed varying degrees of identification with Chinese culture at the surface, intermediate, and deep cultural levels.

3.1 Accumulating Chinese Language Capital, Overcoming Culture Shock

“Language is one of the dominant components of all cultures” [10]. As the most important communication tool, language is the most familiar social symbol for people.

For international students in China, Chinese language capital is a very important tool for cross cultural adaptation in the field of study in China. If students have good Chinese proficiency, it means they have more Chinese language capital, and this can help them build confidence when using Chinese, and then promote their language learning. On the contrary, if their Chinese level is low and language capital is not enough, it can strongly reduce their confidence, and make them feel anxiety and frustration. Many international students have strong shock when they arrive in China at the beginning, because they do not have enough Chinese language capital.

Even if students have learned Chinese for many years before coming to China, there is still a big difference between learning Chinese in non Chinese speaking environment and in Chinese speaking environment. When they move to a new real environment, they have to face a serious problem of lacking language capital. For example, respondent YF02 said, “After coming to China, I found the main difficulty is the language barrier. Because I cannot speak well, I often stay in the student dormitory and do not want to go outside.” Respondent KM03 said, “When I just arrived in China, I could not understand what Chinese people say, because in Korea the audio is slower, and the pronunciation of Korean teachers is a little different from Chinese teachers.”

The 10 international students adopted different ways to “overcome barriers.” Some “like to watch Douyin (TikTok) to learn Chinese” (respondent UM04); some “often order take-out” (respondent BF06); some “make many Chinese friends” (respondent CF07); some “try to participate in various activities held by the school” (respondent RF10); and some “try to mimic the pronunciation of Chinese language partners” (respondent YM08). These behaviors demonstrate their positive attitude and recognition in accumulating Chinese language capital.

As the Chinese level of international students becomes higher and their Chinese language capital increases, their confidence in using Chinese also becomes stronger, and they start to use Chinese more often. Students not only learn Chinese in classroom, but also extend their learning into daily life. They use Chinese social media, and share their daily life and feelings on WeChat Moments, and some of them still continue to use WeChat after they go back to their own countries. It can be seen that for international students, improving Chinese level and increasing Chinese language capital not only helps them to understand Chinese culture and other knowledge, but also makes their life more rich and more interesting. If Chinese language capital is not enough, they will be in a disadvantage position in the field of study in China. Only by accumulating enough language capital, they can get advantage in the competition in the field. The 10 international students all show strong interest in learning Chinese, they spend a lot of time and effort, and the frequency and scope of using Chinese become larger, which shows their identification with Chinese culture through Chinese language.

The identification of international students with surface Chinese culture is not only shown in their active use of Chinese, but also in their positive adjustment to cultural conflict, including adapting to daily life such as food, clothing, living and transportation. Anthropologist Oberg defined “culture shock” as a kind of anxiety which is caused by losing familiar symbols of social interaction [11]. Bennett argues that “culture shock” is a kind of “transitional shock”, which means when a person does not have enough ability to interact effectively with a new environment, it will naturally appear [12]. Life changes like divorce, death of relatives, change of life style, losing original reference system in cross cultural contact, or value change under fast social transformation, all can lead to “transitional shock”, and this is a normal part in human life experience [13].

The main reason international students experience culture shock is that they have left a familiar environment upon entering the field of study in China. The ten international students frequently mentioned the various discomforts they faced when they first arrived in China. For example, respondent TM05 said, "For me, the biggest discomfort was the change in lifestyle. I stayed in the school dormitory, and the dormitory closed at 10 p.m. In my country, I had never lived in a school dormitory before."

As the Chinese language and cultural capital of the 10 international students increased, they gradually adapted to learning and living in the new environment, and their sense of inner calm grew. They progressively adapted to the different customs and behavior patterns in the Chinese field, unconsciously integrating their original habitus. Some adjusted their lifestyles, such as respondent YF02, who said, "I really like Chinese food, and I've gotten used to eating with chopsticks. I enjoy watching Chinese TV dramas, especially Chinese pop music, and I've also learned many Chinese songs." Some changed their dietary habits, such as respondent KM03, who said, "I particularly like Chinese floral tea and often carry a thermos bottle with me. I haven't drunk cold water in a long time." Others changed their perspectives, such as respondent IM01, who said, "I've made many Chinese friends and met a lot of international students. I've learned to accept the diversity of the world and look at the world from different perspectives."

Bourdieu believes that the imbalance in the possession of capital types and quantities leads actors to adopt different strategies: either completely change and subvert, or maintain, or withdraw from the game [7]. Clearly, the 10 international students all chose the strategy of maintaining the new field's conventions. To maintain their position, they needed to adjust themselves and actively adapt. Ward and Kennedy's empirical research showed that sojourners who adopt an integrative adaptation mode experience the least psychological anxiety and are able to successfully adapt to the target language society and culture [14]. The strategy these sojourners adopt aligns with the maintenance strategy mentioned in Bourdieu's generative structuralism theory. As their sense of adaptation grew, many international students not only maintained the new field's conventions but also gradually developed a desire to integrate, showing their identification with surface Chinese culture.

International students who fail to construct an identification with Chinese culture often choose the strategy of withdrawing from the game. They fail to accumulate the necessary Chinese language and cultural capital to compete in the new field and thus return empty-handed. International students who adjust their habitus and actively accumulate Chinese language and cultural capital become the winners in the field of study in China. They find ways to embrace and compromise with cultural differences, seeking common ground while respecting differences, and construct an intercultural identity that includes identification with Chinese culture, thereby finding a suitable position for themselves in the field's contest.

3.2 Confronting Stereotypes, from Acceptance to Identification

Before coming to China, many international students had a limited understanding of the country (e.g., respondent IM01) and some even held stereotypical views. For instance, respondent KM03 said, "I thought every Chinese person could do Kung fu." They learned about China's "long history and strong economic development" (respondent CF07) from books, the internet, movies, and television, and knew that "Chinese people speak Chinese, eat dumplings, and practice Tai Chi" (respondent UM09). They also had impressions like "Chinese people are not very tall, and their eyes are not very big" (respondent TM05), and "China is known for its hospitality, and Chinese people are very friendly to foreigners" (respondent YM08). Many international students in China rely solely on media and books to gain knowledge about China, so their understanding is limited, often resulting in oversimplified and biased views in cross-cultural exchanges, sometimes forming ethnic prejudices. For example, respondent UM04 said, "Before coming to China, many of the things I heard were wrong, like that it's not clean and people are rude." When first arriving in China, he carried these preconceived notions and kept his distance from Chinese people and communities, remaining an observer. However, as his time in China progressed, his views on Chinese people changed significantly. "I found that Chinese people are very friendly and eager to help others. They love to help each other accomplish tasks." He went on to make many Chinese friends and eventually developed a strong identification with China.

Generally speaking, foreigners who have not been to China usually build their impression about China mainly from second hand information, such as from family, friends, media and internet. This kind of understanding is often abstract, and not very concrete or vivid. Some international students can have more direct contact with Chinese people and culture through institutions like Confucius Institutes in their own countries. Although this kind of contact is limited, it still gives them some valuable experience.

After coming to China, all the 10 international students changed their stereotypes about China. Respondent TM05 said, "After coming to China, I find that many stereotypes and negative news about China in media are not true. Many people in my country do not really understand what China is like." Respondent CF07 said, "Most things I heard before coming to China were wrong. I like Chinese clothes very much, they are cheap and also beautiful. The fruits are also cheap and very tasty. I love China, and I feel very safe here."

From the interview of these 10 international students, it can be seen that their study abroad experience has big influence on their cultural identity. The real situation of studying in China helps them a lot in accumulating Chinese language and cultural capital, and this also promotes their identification with Chinese language and culture. The study abroad experience makes them have close contact with Chinese people and society, and also build their social network in China. Social network not only influences second language learners' identification with the second language [15], but also affects their identification with Chinese social and cultural values. As international students get more Chinese language

and cultural capital, their image about China and Chinese people becomes more complete, from initial understanding to acceptance, and finally to identification. This process also changes their previous stereotypes, and reduces misunderstanding and prejudice about Chinese people and Chinese society.

3.3 Integrating Individual Habitus, Reconstructing Intercultural Identity

Many studies have shown that for international students, it is most difficult for them to identify with deep cultural values, world view, ethical idea and aesthetic belief which are different from their own culture, although it is not impossible [4]. The cross cultural experience of international students shows a kind of layered process. First they contact surface material culture, then the middle level culture such as political, historical and legal system, and finally the deep cultural elements like values. This process progresses from surface attraction to deeper understanding, and only after enough contact and experience, students can really understand the inner meaning of these cultural values [16]. Wei Yanjun’s quantitative research on American learners shows that second language learners who have study experience in China have higher language identity, cultural identity and ethnic identity, but their value system does not change much [4]. But in fact, as international students understand Chinese language and culture more deeply, their identification with Chinese cultural values also has some change. They begin to find some similar points between their own cultural values and Chinese values, or their values may change under the influence of Chinese culture.

At the beginning, international students will have some degree of culture shock when they face new values. For example, respondent CF07 said, “Everyone I met in China is very friendly and always wants to help me, this is very different from my country.” In cross cultural contact, international students keep adjusting themselves in order to adapt to the new field. With time going, they learn to respect, tolerate and accept, and then find common points. Respondent BF06 said, “Chinese culture has some parts which are very similar to my native culture, for example Mid Autumn Festival, all family members come together, showing strong family idea. Also there is respect for old people and attention to professional morality.”

The study abroad experience in China helps international students to accumulate Chinese language and cultural capital more effectively. When the amount and type of their capital become more, they are more likely to think problems in a more diversified way, understand and accept differences, have empathy in cross cultural communication, and finally build deeper cultural identity.

4 CONCLUSION

4.1 BASIC CONCLUSION

Through the analysis and discussion of the above original data, this study finds that international students’ identification with Chinese culture appears at different levels such as surface, middle, and deep layers. A key feature is the reconstruction of learners’ cultural identity, which is a recognition of foreign culture under the interaction between individual learners and the external environment. It is a cross-cultural identity with certain complexity and multi-level characteristics. The Chinese study abroad field plays an important role in this process (see Figure 1).

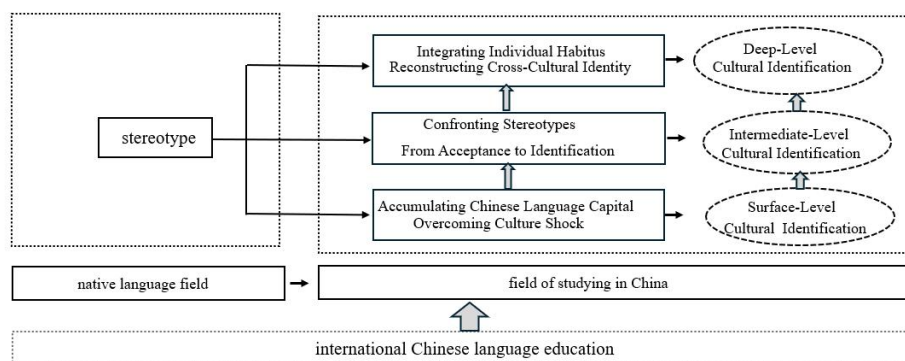


Figure 1 The Process and Hierarchy of Intercultural Identity in the Field of Studying in China

From Figure 1, it can be seen that the generation of international students’ cross-cultural identity is closely related to their capital accumulation and the integration mechanism of habitus. Surface identity mainly reflects international students’ active accumulation of Chinese language capital and their proactive overcoming of cultural shocks. At this level, students continuously increase their Chinese language capital through classroom learning, daily communication, and media usage. Meanwhile, under the guidance of the new field’s norms, they make initial adjustments to their original habitus, gradually adapting to Chinese lifestyle and behavioral habits. Middle-level identity reflects international students’ recognition and transcendence of stereotypes. With the continued accumulation of Chinese language and cultural capital, students begin to establish deeper social networks with Chinese society. Their habitus integration shifts from passive adaptation to active adjustment, and abstract knowledge based on others’ introductions is gradually replaced by concrete experience. Their understanding of China changes from stereotypes to a more diversified cognition. The formation of deep identity depends on the deep integration of students’ habitus into the new field and the

continuous accumulation of different forms of capital. At this stage, international students not only gain rich Chinese language and cultural capital, but also gradually combine their original habitus with the norms of the field through multicultural interaction. Their worldview, values, and deep cultural psychology are also reconstructed in a subtle way. Finally, they build a sense of adaptation and identification between their native culture and Chinese culture. This mechanism shows that the cross-cultural identity of international students is not a simple and one-way acceptance of culture. Under the regulation of the field, it is formed through the interaction between capital accumulation and habitus integration. It is a dynamic construction process, which develops step by step from the external level to the internal level.

The process of second language acquisition and cultural adaptation is consistent with this mechanism. Second language acquisition can be seen as one part of cultural integration. The integration degree between learners' native culture and the second culture influences the success or failure of acquisition. Both Berry's two-dimensional model of cultural adaptation and Anderson's stage model of cross-cultural adaptation can explain the adjustment of habitus [17,18]. With the passage of time, international students gradually adapt to the social life of the host country. After returning to their home country, they also need to readjust to the social environment there. When international students in China increase their Chinese language capital and reduce language communication barriers, they begin to integrate their original habitus into the new field [19]. The habitus formed from early experience changes when they occupy different positions in the new field. Their original habitus gradually adapts to the present environment.

In this process, they gradually adapt to a different language, culture, ethnic group, and value system. This helps them see a wider world. They learn to understand the world from different perspectives and accept the diversity of the world. Finally, they build cross-cultural identity, including identification with Chinese culture.

Cultural differences cause cultural distance. People usually understand other cultures from the perspective of their own national culture, and international students in China are also the same. The larger the cultural distance is, the more effort and resources individuals need to use to overcome the cultural gap. The changes in their life are also more obvious, and the psychological anxiety they feel is more serious. By contrast, when people go to a country whose culture is similar to their own culture, the cultural shock is smaller, and the speed of cultural adaptation is faster. Chinese language learners who have not studied in China often have some preconceived stereotypes. These stereotypes make them selectively remember and search for evidence which can support their original views, and then the stereotypes are further strengthened. The strengthening of stereotypes has a negative influence on cross-cultural communication. It may lead to unfriendly emotions, and even hostile emotions. However, Chinese language learners who have study-abroad experience in China can accumulate more concrete Chinese language capital and cultural capital through their personal experience. They can also form a deeper understanding of Chinese society and Chinese culture. Therefore, their real judgments gradually replace previous stereotypes. In this sense, the study-abroad experience in China becomes an important external force for Chinese language learners to build Chinese cultural identity.

4.2 Implications for International Chinese Education

In November 2024, the General Secretary of China pointed out in his congratulatory letter to the World Chinese Language Conference that "International Chinese education is widely welcomed. It shows the charm of openness and inclusiveness, presents the value of mutual learning, reflects the spirit of cooperation and mutual benefit, and embodies the joint efforts of Chinese and foreign people" [20]. International Chinese education not only promotes Chinese language and Chinese culture in the world, but also supports the development of education for international students in China. "Higher education is an important indicator of a country's development level and development potential" [21]. As an important part of higher education, the field of studying in China mainly undertakes the education of international students in China. It has also become an important factor for improving national soft power.

In the Chinese study-abroad field, international students, due to their unique human characteristics, continually adjust their individual habitus, undergoing changes and reconstruction of their identity, building a more inclusive, reasonable, and diverse cross-cultural identity, thus realizing their understanding and identification with Chinese culture. The influence of the Chinese study-abroad field in international Chinese education is reflected not only in its impact on the identity reconstruction of international students but also in the adjustment of the field itself. Only by continuously improving and optimizing this field can it become a more valuable and meaningful shared platform for students from various countries to communicate and compete fairly, thus better fulfilling its role. Based on the findings of this study, optimizing and improving the Chinese study-abroad field should be advanced with the guidance of national macro strategies and through specific practices at the meso and micro levels:

4.2.1 Optimize curriculum design to promote gradient construction of cultural identity

The identification of international students with Chinese culture shows a gradient development from surface to middle and deep layers. The curriculum design should follow this rule, integrating cultural experience content (such as food, festivals, clothing, etc.) into language courses, introducing institutional culture and social norms (such as Chinese law and society, etiquette culture) in intermediate stages, and offering deep cultural courses (such as Chinese philosophy, comparison of Chinese and Western cultures) at advanced stages. Through a "from shallow to deep, from concrete to abstract" curriculum system, help students naturally achieve a progressive cultural identity while learning the language.

4.2.2 Construct a cross-cultural support system to strengthen social capital accumulation in the field

The social networks established by international students during their time in China have a significant impact on their cultural identity. Universities should systematically construct a "peer support + mentor guidance + social integration"

triadic support system. This includes building a “language partner” or “study partner” system between Chinese students and foreign students, so as to promote their daily communication. It also includes setting up a mentor system for international students. In this system, full-time teachers or senior international students can provide guidance in study and life. At the same time, universities can organize community visits, cultural experience activities, and internship programs. These activities can expand international students’ contact with Chinese society. They can also help them accumulate the social capital needed in the field and reduce the anxiety brought by cultural distance.

4.2.3 Enhance teachers’ cross-cultural competence to guide the integration of habitus

The integration of habitus in the new field is a process in which international students make active adaptation and also receive external guidance. As important actors in the field, teachers’ cross-cultural teaching ability and management ability directly influence the adaptation quality of international students. Therefore, it is suggested to add training modules of cross-cultural communication competence into the teacher development system. This can improve teachers’ understanding of international students’ cultural backgrounds. It can also improve their ability to identify and deal with cultural conflicts, and help them use more effective strategies to promote multicultural dialogue in teaching. Through active guidance, teachers can help students realize the integration of habitus on the basis of respecting cultural differences.

4.2.4 Focus on individual differences, provide targeted guidance and support

This study finds significant individual differences in the cultural identity construction of international students, influenced by factors such as their national background, language proficiency, length of stay in China, and social networks. Universities should establish cultural adaptation records for international students, regularly assess their progress in language capital, social integration, and cultural identity, and provide differentiated support for students at different stages and with different needs. For example, for newcomers, emphasize language support and cultural adaptation guidance, while for long-term students, offer opportunities for in-depth cultural participation and social practice, helping them move from “adaptation” to “identity”.

Guided by macro strategies, exploring and implementing an integrated educational model at the meso and micro levels, focusing on the individual strategies of international students in China, and guiding them gradually from “shallow to deep”, from “beauty to goodness”, to construct cross-cultural identity step by step, will undoubtedly contribute to the cultivation of internationalized, professional Chinese language talents who are proficient in Chinese, knowledgeable about China, and well-versed in their field. This will play an important role in the “Belt and Road” initiative and in the construction of a “community with a shared future for mankind”.

4.3 Research Limitations and Prospects

This study uses qualitative research methods. Through one-year follow-up interviews and observations of 10 international students, it reveals the process and characteristics of the formation of cross-cultural identity among international students. It should be noted that although the sample selection considers the diversity of nationalities, cultural distance, and learning stages, this study still has some limitations.

In terms of sample structure, the 10 research subjects come from Italy, Yemen, South Korea, Turkey, Russia, Bolivia, Uzbekistan, Cameroon, and other countries. They cover cultural circles from Europe, Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Middle East. There are also obvious differences in cultural distance among them. This helps to observe the influence of cultural distance on identity construction. The subjects include both language students and degree students. Their length of stay in China ranges from 1 year to 12 years. This makes it possible to compare the influence of different learning stages and adaptation time. However, because of the limitation of research conditions, this study could not make strict group comparisons on variables such as cultural distance and learning stages.

In terms of research methods, qualitative research can deeply reveal the micro process of individual identity construction. However, the sample size of this study is small, so the external validity of the conclusions is limited. Future research can expand the sample size on the basis of this study. It can also introduce quantitative research methods to systematically measure and analyze cultural distance, length of stay in China, Chinese proficiency, social networks, and other factors.

In addition, future studies can use cross-case comparison methods. They can group and compare international students from different countries and cultural circles. This can further test the generalizability of the theoretical findings of this study. It can also deepen the understanding of the formation mechanism of cross-cultural identity among international students in China.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

FUNDING

This study is a phased achievement of the second batch of the “14th Five-Year Plan” Undergraduate Education and Teaching Reform Project in Zhejiang Province. It was supported by the 2025 General Project of Undergraduate Education and Teaching Reform in Zhejiang Province (JGBA2024597), the 2025 Third Batch of Provincial First-Class Undergraduate International Curriculum Construction Project in Zhejiang Province, the 2024 General Project of the “14th Five-Year Plan” Philosophy and Social Sciences Research Program of Shaoxing City, the 2025 Connotation

Construction Project (Teaching Reform Special Project) of Shaoxing City, and the 2024 Institutional Project of Zhejiang Yuexiu University (Special Construction Fund for Knowledge Graph Courses).

REFERENCES

- [1] Zheng X, Wang L. Cultural identity, social orientation and subjective well-being of Chinese overseas students. *Psychological Development and Education*, 2005(1): 48-54.
- [2] Chen G. *Intercultural communication*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2009.
- [3] Dai XD. *Intercultural Communication Theory*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2011.
- [4] Chen M. The relationship among identity construction, speech accommodation, and oral proficiency development of Chinese as a second language learners. *Language Teaching and Linguistic Studies*, 2022(1): 26-37.
- [5] Qu XR, Li J, Yang X. The impact of cultural identity on the scale of international students in China. *Economic Survey*, 2016(3): 48-53.
- [6] Wei YJ, Wang JQ, Zhu WJ, et al. Individual and social psychological factors influencing intercultural identity of Chinese language learners. *Applied Linguistics*, 2015(2): 107-115.
- [7] Bourdieu P, Wacquant L. *An invitation to reflexive sociology* (Li M. & Li K, Trans.). Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press (CCTP), 2004.
- [8] Charmaz K. *Constructing grounded theory*. London England: Sage Publications, 2014.
- [9] Xu JL. *Unfulfilled Collection: Xu Jialu on Culture*. Guiyang: Guizhou People's Publishing House, 2005.
- [10] Hall ET. *The Silent language* (He DK, Trans.). Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010.
- [11] Oberg K. Culture Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environment. *Practical Anthropology*, 1960(7): 177-182.
- [12] Bennett J. *Concepts of Intercultural Communication: Selected Readings*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1998.
- [13] Adler P. The transitional experience: An alternative view of culture shock. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 1975(4): 13-23.
- [14] Ward C, Kennedy A. Acculturation strategies, psychological adjustment, and sociocultural competence during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 1994(3): 329-343.
- [15] Chen M. The impact of social networks and language identity on the oral production of Chinese as a second language. *Applied Linguistics*, 2022(4): 88-102.
- [16] Wang XS. *Research on Chinese Culture and Intercultural Communication for Second Language Teaching*. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2014.
- [17] Berry JW. Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 1997(1): 5-34.
- [18] Anderson LE. A New Look at an Old Construct: Cross-Cultural Adaptation. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 1994(3): 293-328.
- [19] Lu PF. *A study on Bourdieu's concept of habitus*. Harbin: Heilongjiang University, 2009.
- [20] Chinese president pointed out in his congratulatory letter to the World Chinese Language Conference. 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202411/content_6987298.htm.
- [21] Cui XJ. Cultural Identity and Its Roots. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 2004(4): 102-104, 107.