

International Students as "Cultural Anchors": Mediating Subjects in the International Communication of Chinese Culture

Jingxuan Miao

School of International Education, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing, China

Abstract: *This paper reconceptualizes international students in China not merely as recipients of cultural education but as "cultural anchors"—mediating subjects who stabilize, embody, and transmit Chinese cultural meaning within transnational social fields. Drawing on the concept of "cultural anchoring objects," theories of cultural capital and transnational social fields, and recent Chinese scholarship on cultural communication, the paper develops a theoretical model that traces how international students acquire, embody, and activate cultural anchoring agency through three interrelated processes: cultural capital accumulation during their sojourn, identity reconstruction as bicultural mediators, and relational network embedding upon return to their home countries. The model extends the existing "cultural anchoring objects" framework from the material to the human domain, arguing that international students function as living, dynamic anchors whose personal authority, embodied experience, and relational positioning enable Chinese cultural meaning to take root in foreign social contexts. A mixed-methods research design combining longitudinal tracking, social network analysis, and in-depth interviews is proposed for empirical validation. The paper contributes to both cultural communication theory and international education policy by articulating a new paradigm for understanding the long-term cultural communication impact of international student mobility.*

Keywords: *international students; cultural anchoring; cultural mediation; transnational social fields; cultural capital; Chinese cultural communication; international education*

1. Introduction

The global landscape of international student mobility has undergone significant transformation in the twenty-first century. While traditional destinations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia continue to attract large numbers of international students, China has emerged as a major host country, receiving students from over 190 countries and regions ^[1]. The Chinese government's "Study in China" initiative, reinforced by the Belt and Road framework, has been instrumental in diversifying the geographic and cultural origins of international students on Chinese campuses, with substantial increases in enrollment from Southeast Asian, Central Asian, African, and Latin American countries.

This expansion of international student mobility coincides with China's growing emphasis on cultural communication as a strategic dimension of its global engagement. Scholarship on Chinese cultural communication has developed rapidly, addressing macro-level strategic frameworks (Yao, 2026; Zhang, 2024 ^[2]; Deng and Zhao, 2025 ^[3]), media-technological channels (Deng and Zhao, 2025 ^[4-5]), narrative strategies (Deng and Lin, 2025 ^[6]; Zhang, Lv, and Si, 2025 ^[7]; Zhou, 2025 ^[8]), and audience reception mechanisms (Meng and Liu, 2024 ^[9]; Chen, 2025 ^[10]). However, a persistent asymmetry characterizes this literature: while institutional actors—Confucius Institutes, state media, cultural diplomacy programs—have been extensively theorized, the communicative agency of individual international students remains underdeveloped.

This paper addresses that asymmetry by proposing a conceptual innovation: the international student as "cultural anchor." The term draws on Meng and Liu's (2024) ^[9] concept of "cultural anchoring objects"—tangible cultural artifacts that serve as stable reference points for cross-cultural understanding—and extends it from the material to the human domain. Just as a cultural anchoring object (such as Chinese tea, calligraphy, or traditional medicine) provides a concrete, stable point of reference through which foreign audiences can access and comprehend Chinese cultural meaning, an

international student who has lived and studied in China embodies a living, dynamic form of cultural anchoring. Upon returning to their home countries, these students carry within them accumulated cultural knowledge, embodied cultural practices, and personal narratives that function as anchoring points for their communities' understanding of China.

The theoretical significance of this reconceptualization lies in its bridging of two previously separate domains: the study of international student mobility (which has focused primarily on educational outcomes and individual development) and the study of cultural communication (which has focused primarily on institutional strategies and media channels). By positioning international students as cultural anchors, the framework illuminates how individual-level experiences of cultural immersion translate into macro-level effects on cross-cultural perception and understanding.

This paper develops its argument through five stages. First, it reviews the relevant literature on cultural anchoring, transnationalism, and international student mobility. Second, it articulates a theoretical framework that integrates Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, transnational social field theory, and cultural mediation concepts. Third, it develops a three-phase model of cultural anchoring—acquisition, embodiment, and activation—that traces the trajectory from student sojourner to cultural anchor. Fourth, it proposes a research design for empirical validation. Finally, it discusses the implications for international education policy and cultural communication strategy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Anchoring: From Objects to Agents

The concept of cultural anchoring has emerged from multiple theoretical traditions. In social psychology, Moscovici's (1984) ^[11] social representations theory introduced the concept of "anchoring" as the process by which unfamiliar phenomena are integrated into existing cognitive frameworks by linking them to familiar reference points. This concept was extended to cross-cultural contexts by researchers examining how foreign cultural elements are assimilated into host societies' representational systems.

In the Chinese cultural communication literature, Meng and Liu (2024) ^[9] formalized the concept of "cultural anchoring objects" (*wenhua maodingwu*) through an empirical study of youth from five ASEAN countries. They identified specific cultural artifacts—including Chinese cuisine, martial arts, traditional festivals, and technological products—that served as stable reference points for young Southeast Asians' understanding of Chinese culture. Their findings demonstrated that these objects function as anchors because they are (a) concrete and tangible, (b) emotionally resonant, (c) culturally distinctive, and (d) accessible through direct experience or media exposure. The anchoring effect operates through a dual mechanism: the object provides both a cognitive reference point (a "hook" for organizing cultural knowledge) and an affective connection (an emotional association that motivates further cultural exploration).

Chen's (2025) ^[10] analysis of "culture-laden objects" in international communication further elaborated on how material artifacts carry and transmit cultural meaning across cultural boundaries. Drawing on Appadurai's (1986) ^[12] concept of the "social life of things," Chen argued that cultural objects acquire communicative power through their circulation in transnational contexts, where they serve as material embodiments of cultural identity and values. This perspective resonates with Bourdieu's (1986) ^[13] theorization of cultural capital, which identifies material objects, embodied dispositions, and institutional credentials as three forms of cultural capital that function as resources in social interaction.

This paper extends the cultural anchoring framework from objects to human agents. The theoretical justification for this extension rests on the observation that international students possess all four characteristics that Meng and Liu (2024) ^[9] identified as constitutive of effective cultural anchors: they are concrete and identifiable (as specific individuals with named identities and personal stories), emotionally resonant (as living witnesses whose experiences carry affective authenticity), culturally distinctive (as individuals who have acquired first-hand knowledge of Chinese culture), and accessible (as members of their home communities who remain available for cultural inquiry and exchange upon return). The critical advantage of human cultural anchors over material objects is their capacity for dialogue, interpretation, and adaptation—qualities that enable them to respond to the specific cultural questions and curiosities of their communities in ways that static objects cannot.

2.2 Transnational Social Fields and Cultural Mediation

The theoretical framework of transnationalism provides essential scaffolding for understanding how international students function as cultural anchors. Wimmer and Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) ^[14] critiqued "methodological nationalism"—the tendency to treat nation-states as natural units of social analysis—and proposed the concept of "transnational social fields" as an alternative analytical framework. Transnational social fields are networks of social relations that span national borders, connecting individuals, communities, and institutions across multiple countries simultaneously.

International students occupy a distinctive position within transnational social fields. During their sojourn in China, they develop social connections with Chinese peers, teachers, and community members while maintaining active ties with family, friends, and professional networks in their home countries. This dual embeddedness creates what Vertovec (2009) ^[15] termed "transnational social positioning"—a location within social space that is simultaneously "here" and "there," enabling the individual to function as a bridge between social worlds. Levitt's (1998) ^[16] concept of "social remittances"—the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from host to home countries through migrant networks—is directly applicable to international students, who transmit cultural knowledge, social practices, and perceptual frameworks alongside (or in place of) financial remittances.

The concept of cultural mediation provides a complementary theoretical lens. Bhabha's (1994) ^[17] concept of the "third space"—a liminal zone of cultural encounter where new meanings emerge through the negotiation between cultures—captures the creative dimension of cultural mediation. International students do not simply transmit Chinese cultural content unchanged to their home communities; they interpret, translate, and reframe cultural meaning in ways that are intelligible and relevant to their audiences. Pratt's (1991) ^[18] notion of the "contact zone" offers a related insight: cultural encounters produce not merely the transfer of existing knowledge but the generation of new understanding that neither party possessed independently.

Byram's (1997) ^[19] framework of intercultural communicative competence further specifies the skills that enable effective cultural mediation. His model identifies five dimensions—attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness—that together constitute the capacity to mediate between cultures. International students who develop high levels of intercultural communicative competence during their sojourn are better positioned to function as effective cultural anchors because they can navigate the complexities of cultural translation without resorting to simplification or stereotyping.

2.3 International Student Mobility and Cultural Outcomes

Research on international student mobility has extensively documented the developmental outcomes of study abroad experiences. Ward, Bochner, and Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) ^[20] provided a comprehensive framework distinguishing between "culture learning" and "stress and coping" approaches to cross-cultural adaptation. Kim's (2001) ^[21] integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation proposed a dynamic systems model in which host communication competence, ethnic communication, and environmental conditions interact to produce adaptive transformation. Berry's (1997) ^[22] acculturation framework identified the strategies that individuals adopt in response to cultural contact, with "integration"—the maintenance of original cultural identity alongside acquisition of host cultural competence—generally producing the most positive outcomes.

More specific to international education, Deardorff (2006) ^[23] developed a process model of intercultural competence that traces the developmental trajectory from attitudes (openness, respect, curiosity) through knowledge acquisition and skill development to internal outcomes (adaptability, empathy, ethnorelative perspective) and external outcomes (effective and appropriate communication and behavior in intercultural situations). This model has been widely adopted in international education assessment but has primarily focused on the benefits to students themselves rather than the broader societal effects of their intercultural development.

The literature on "returnee" international students offers some insight into the post-sojourn impact of international education. Research has documented how returnees function as agents of social and cultural change in their home countries, introducing new professional practices, social attitudes, and cultural perspectives acquired abroad ^[24]. However, this literature has primarily focused on economic and professional impacts rather than cultural communication effects. The specific question of how returnee international students influence their home communities' understanding of their host country's

culture has received limited systematic attention.

In the Chinese context, Liu (2023) ^[25] examined education as a channel for international cultural communication, arguing that educational institutions serve as cultural communication nodes. Zhu (2023) ^[26] discussed how Chinese language education integrates cultural transmission, though primarily from a curriculum design perspective. Jiang and Hua (2023) ^[27] explored the practical orientations for Chinese cultural communication against the backdrop of de-globalization, noting the increasing importance of interpersonal and grassroots channels as institutional channels face growing resistance in some geopolitical contexts. Zhang (2025) ^[28] analyzed the interactive mechanisms between cultural communication and economic cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, implicitly acknowledging the role of individual actors who bridge cultural and economic domains.

Despite these contributions, no existing study has systematically theorized international students as active agents of Chinese cultural communication through the specific lens of cultural anchoring. This paper fills that gap by developing a comprehensive theoretical model that traces the trajectory from student sojourner to cultural anchor.

3. Theoretical Framework: The Cultural Anchoring Model

The cultural anchoring model proposed in this paper conceptualizes the process through which international students become cultural anchors as a three-phase trajectory: (1) cultural capital accumulation during the sojourn period, (2) identity reconstruction as bicultural mediators, and (3) relational network activation upon return. Each phase involves distinct mechanisms and conditions, and the overall anchoring effect depends on the successful completion of all three phases.

3.1 Phase One: Cultural Capital Accumulation

The first phase of the cultural anchoring process involves the accumulation of Chinese cultural capital during the student's sojourn in China. Bourdieu (1986) ^[13] identified three forms of cultural capital—embodied, objectified, and institutionalized—each of which is relevant to the international student experience.

Embodied cultural capital refers to the durable dispositions of mind and body that are acquired through prolonged engagement with a cultural field. For international students, this includes linguistic competence in Chinese, familiarity with social norms and etiquette, appreciation of cultural aesthetics, and the bodily habits associated with daily life in China. This form of capital is acquired not through formal instruction alone but through the cumulative effect of everyday cultural immersion—what Kim (2001) ^[21] termed "adaptive learning" through host communication competence. Deng and Zhao's (2025) ^[5] concept of "embodied media channels" is particularly relevant here: the sensory, physical, and interpersonal dimensions of cultural experience constitute a distinct mode of cultural knowledge that cannot be replicated through mediated or secondhand sources. The student who learns to navigate a Chinese wet market, participate in a tea ceremony, or engage in casual conversation with neighbors acquires a form of cultural knowledge that is deeply embedded in bodily experience and therefore particularly resistant to forgetting or distortion.

Objectified cultural capital comprises material cultural goods that the student acquires, collects, or creates during the sojourn. This includes books, artworks, photographs, clothing, instruments, and other tangible artifacts that embody Chinese cultural meaning. These objects function as portable cultural resources that the student can draw upon in future cultural mediation activities. They correspond closely to Meng and Liu's (2024) ^[9] "cultural anchoring objects," but with the critical addition of personal narrative: objects acquired through personal experience carry stories and memories that amplify their anchoring power. A Chinese tea set purchased in a shop is an object; a tea set received as a gift from a Chinese host family, accompanied by the story of shared tea-drinking occasions, is an object imbued with narrative and affective significance that enhances its communicative potential.

Institutionalized cultural capital takes the form of formal credentials and recognized qualifications. For international students, this includes academic degrees from Chinese universities, language proficiency certifications, and professional qualifications. These credentials confer legitimacy and authority on the student's cultural knowledge, enabling them to speak about Chinese culture with a credibility that self-taught or media-informed commentators may lack. The institutionalization of cultural capital is particularly important in professional and academic contexts, where formal qualifications serve as gatekeepers for cultural authority.

The accumulation of cultural capital is not automatic; it depends on several mediating conditions. Berry's (1997) ^[22] acculturation framework suggests that students who adopt an "integration" strategy—actively engaging with Chinese culture while maintaining their original cultural identity—accumulate more diverse and adaptable cultural capital than those who adopt "separation" or "marginalization" strategies. Ward et al.'s (2001) culture learning framework further suggests that the depth and quality of cultural capital accumulation depends on the student's level of host communication competence, social interaction with host nationals, and reflective processing of cultural encounters. Students who remain within expatriate enclaves or who engage with Chinese culture primarily through academic study rather than lived experience accumulate less embodied cultural capital and are therefore less effectively positioned to serve as cultural anchors.

3.2 Phase Two: Identity Reconstruction as Bicultural Mediators

The second phase of the cultural anchoring process involves a transformation of identity that enables the student to function as a mediator between cultures. This phase extends beyond the acquisition of cultural knowledge to encompass a restructuring of the self—a reconfiguration of identity that integrates elements of both the home culture and the host culture into a coherent bicultural self.

Kim's (2001) ^[21] integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation provides a theoretical foundation for understanding this identity transformation. Kim argued that sustained cross-cultural engagement produces "adaptive transformation"—a restructuring of the individual's cognitive, affective, and behavioral orientations that results in increased "intercultural identity." This intercultural identity is characterized by the capacity to operate within multiple cultural frameworks, to translate between cultural systems, and to adopt a reflexive perspective on one's own cultural assumptions.

Bhabha's (1994) ^[17] concept of "hybridity" offers a complementary perspective. Rather than viewing cultural identity as a fixed essence rooted in a single cultural tradition, Bhabha proposed that cultural encounters produce hybrid identities that exist in a "third space" between cultures. In this third space, new cultural meanings are generated through the negotiation between different cultural systems. International students who develop hybrid identities are able to move beyond simple cultural comparison to creative cultural synthesis, generating new ways of understanding and presenting Chinese culture that are informed by both their home cultural frameworks and their lived experience in China.

The identity reconstruction phase is critical for cultural anchoring because it determines the student's capacity for cultural mediation. A student who has acquired extensive cultural knowledge but has not undergone identity transformation may be able to transmit factual information about Chinese culture but lacks the deeper interpretive capacity to translate cultural meaning across cultural boundaries. Conversely, a student who has developed a bicultural identity but lacks substantial cultural knowledge may be effective at building rapport across cultures but lacks the substantive content to anchor meaningful cultural understanding. The most effective cultural anchors are those who combine deep cultural capital with bicultural identity—students who both know Chinese culture intimately and can interpret it in terms that resonate with their home audiences.

Deng and Zhao's (2025) ^[29] intersubjectivity framework illuminates the relational dimension of this identity transformation. Their analysis of Chinese cultural peripheral communication from an intersubjectivity perspective suggests that effective cultural communication requires the establishment of mutual understanding between communicative subjects, rather than the unidirectional transmission of cultural content. International students who develop bicultural identities are positioned to establish this mutual understanding because they share cultural ground with both their Chinese interlocutors and their home communities. They can anticipate misunderstandings, identify points of cultural resonance, and construct bridges of meaning that would be invisible to someone operating from a monocultural perspective.

3.3 Phase Three: Relational Network Activation

The third phase of the cultural anchoring process occurs when international students return to their home countries (or engage with home communities through digital channels during their sojourn) and activate their accumulated cultural capital and bicultural identities within their relational networks. This phase is where cultural anchoring moves from potential to actuality—where the student's cultural knowledge and identity become active resources for cross-cultural understanding within their

communities.

The concept of transnational social fields^[14] provides the theoretical framework for understanding this activation process. International students do not operate in isolation; they are embedded in networks of family, friends, professional colleagues, and community members that span national borders. Upon return, these networks become the primary channels through which cultural anchoring effects are realized. The returnee student becomes a node in the transnational network through which Chinese cultural meaning flows into the home community.

Levitt's (1998)^[16] concept of "social remittances" provides a useful analogy. Just as migrant workers transmit financial remittances to their home communities, international students transmit "cultural remittances"—knowledge, perspectives, attitudes, and practices acquired abroad that influence the cultural understanding of those around them. These cultural remittances operate through multiple channels: direct conversation and storytelling, social media sharing, professional and academic exchanges, community engagement, and the modeling of cultural practices (such as cooking Chinese food, practicing Chinese arts, or observing Chinese customs in daily life).

The effectiveness of relational network activation depends on three factors. The first is network centrality—the student's position within their home community's social network. Students who occupy central positions (such as community leaders, educators, media figures, or professionals with extensive networks) have greater potential to disseminate cultural knowledge widely. The second factor is communicative competence—the student's ability to articulate their cultural knowledge in ways that are engaging and accessible to their audiences. Byram's (1997)^[19] framework of intercultural communicative competence is relevant here: students who have developed skills of interpreting, relating, and discovery are better equipped to translate their cultural experiences into communicable forms.

The third factor is the receptivity of the home community. Audiences in different social and cultural contexts will vary in their openness to Chinese cultural content, and the anchoring effect will be stronger in communities where there is existing curiosity or need for cultural knowledge about China. Sun's (2025)^[30] analysis of the global cultural landscape and Chinese cultural communication suggests that receptivity is shaped by broader geopolitical, economic, and media discourses that create the conditions for cultural communication. Yao's (2026)^[2] "tripartite model" further suggests that the transnational dimension of cultural communication is increasingly important as global audiences seek authentic, personal perspectives that complement or challenge institutional narratives.

Star and Griesemer's (1989)^[31] concept of "boundary objects"—entities that are plastic enough to adapt to local needs yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across different social worlds—offers a final theoretical lens for understanding the cultural anchoring function. International students who return to their home countries as cultural anchors function as human boundary objects: they maintain their connection to Chinese culture while adapting their cultural presentation to the specific needs, interests, and frameworks of their home communities. This dual positioning enables them to create shared understanding across cultural boundaries without erasing cultural difference—a capacity that is essential for genuine cross-cultural communication (cf. Zhang, Lv, and Si, 2025^[32]).

4. The Integrated Cultural Anchoring Model

The three phases described above constitute an integrated model that can be visualized as a dynamic cycle rather than a linear sequence. In this model, the international student's trajectory from sojourner to cultural anchor is driven by the interaction of four key variables: (a) the depth and breadth of cultural capital accumulated during the sojourn, (b) the degree of bicultural identity development achieved, (c) the centrality and density of the student's transnational relational networks, and (d) the receptivity of the home community's cultural environment.

The model generates several testable propositions. First, the strength of the cultural anchoring effect is predicted to be a multiplicative function of all four variables: high cultural capital combined with weak identity development or limited network reach will produce a weaker anchoring effect than high scores on all dimensions. Second, the model predicts that the anchoring effect will be strongest in the period immediately following return, when the student's cultural experiences are fresh and their home community's curiosity is highest, but that sustained anchoring requires ongoing engagement with Chinese culture and active maintenance of transnational ties. Third, the model predicts that students who maintain digital connections with Chinese peers and communities during their sojourn and after

return will exhibit stronger and more durable anchoring effects than those whose Chinese connections lapse upon departure.

The model also acknowledges the possibility of "negative anchoring"—cases in which international students' experiences in China produce unfavorable cultural perceptions that are transmitted to their home communities. This possibility is implicit in Berry's (1997) ^[22] acculturation framework, which identifies "marginalization" and "separation" as strategies that can produce negative outcomes. Ward et al.'s (2001) stress and coping approach further recognizes that cross-cultural transitions can produce frustration, disillusionment, and cultural rejection. A comprehensive theory of cultural anchoring must account for these negative possibilities rather than assuming uniformly positive outcomes.

5. Proposed Research Design

5.1 Research Questions

The following research questions guide the proposed empirical investigation:

RQ1: How do international students in China accumulate embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital during their sojourn, and what factors influence the depth and breadth of this accumulation?

RQ2: To what extent do international students develop bicultural identities that enable them to function as cultural mediators, and how does this identity transformation relate to their cultural communication behaviors?

RQ3: How do returnee international students activate their cultural anchoring agency within their home communities, and what factors determine the effectiveness of this activation?

RQ4: What is the measurable impact of returnee cultural anchors on their communities' knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral dispositions toward Chinese culture?

5.2 Methodology

This study proposes a multi-phase, mixed-methods research design that tracks international students across the three phases of the cultural anchoring model.

Phase A: Sojourn Period Study. A longitudinal panel study will be conducted with international students enrolled at Nanjing University of Science and Technology and partner institutions. Participants will be assessed at three time points (entry, midpoint, and completion of study) using a combination of: (a) the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) to measure intercultural sensitivity development ^[33]; (b) a cultural capital inventory specifically designed for the Chinese cultural context, measuring embodied cultural capital (language proficiency, cultural practice participation, social network density with Chinese nationals), objectified cultural capital (cultural artifact collection and creation), and institutionalized cultural capital (academic credentials and certifications); (c) a bicultural identity integration scale adapted from Benet-Benet-Martinez and Haritatos (2005) ^[34]; and (d) semi-structured interviews exploring students' cultural experiences, identity reflections, and communication practices.

Phase B: Post-Return Tracking Study. A follow-up study will be conducted with graduates who have returned to their home countries, using: (a) social network analysis to map the structure and composition of returnees' transnational networks, including both Chinese connections and home community connections; (b) a cultural anchoring behavior inventory measuring the frequency, diversity, and depth of cultural communication activities (conversations about China, social media sharing, cultural events organization, professional applications of Chinese cultural knowledge); (c) a cultural anchoring impact survey administered to members of returnees' social networks, measuring changes in cultural knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intentions related to China; and (d) in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of returnees and their network members to explore the qualitative dimensions of cultural anchoring.

Phase C: Comparative Analysis. The data from Phases A and B will be integrated to test the model's propositions using structural equation modeling (SEM) and multi-level analysis. The SEM model will specify the hypothesized relationships between cultural capital accumulation, bicultural identity development, network activation, and anchoring impact, with mediating and moderating variables

specified based on the theoretical framework. Multi-level analysis will account for the nested structure of the data (individuals within communities within countries).

5.3 Sampling Strategy

The study will employ a stratified purposive sampling strategy to ensure diversity across key dimensions: ethnic group (with representation from Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas), academic discipline (STEM, humanities, social sciences, business), degree level (undergraduate, master's, doctoral), and duration of study in China (1–5 years). A minimum sample of 300 students for the sojourn study and 150 returnees for the tracking study is proposed, with qualitative subsamples of 40 and 30 respectively.

6. Discussion and Implications

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

The cultural anchoring model proposed in this paper makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends the concept of cultural anchoring from the material domain explored by Meng and Liu (2024)^[9] and Chen (2025)^[10] to the human domain, demonstrating that living agents can function as cultural anchors with distinctive advantages over material objects—including the capacity for dialogue, interpretation, adaptation, and sustained engagement. This extension enriches cultural anchoring theory by introducing the dimensions of agency, reflexivity, and relationality that are inherent in human but not material anchors.

Second, the model bridges the previously separate literatures on international student mobility and cultural communication by identifying cultural anchoring as a mechanism through which individual-level educational experiences translate into macro-level cultural communication effects. This bridging responds to Liu's (2023)^[25] call for deeper theoretical integration between education and cultural communication scholarship, and provides a concrete mechanism—the three-phase trajectory from accumulation to embodiment to activation—through which this integration can be empirically investigated.

Third, the model offers a dynamic, process-oriented alternative to static conceptions of cultural communication. Rather than treating cultural communication as a series of discrete transmission events, the anchoring model conceptualizes it as a sustained, evolving process in which the cultural anchor's knowledge, identity, and relationships continuously develop and interact over time. This process orientation aligns with Kim's (2001)^[21] dynamic systems approach to cross-cultural adaptation and with Wimmer and Glick Wimmer and Glick Schiller's (2002)^[14] insistence on the fluid, transnational character of contemporary social life.

Fourth, the model acknowledges the contingency and variability of cultural anchoring effects. Not all international students become effective cultural anchors, and the model specifies the conditions that facilitate or inhibit anchoring. This contingency approach is more theoretically productive than universalistic claims about the cultural communication benefits of international education, because it enables targeted interventions to strengthen anchoring effects where conditions are favorable.

6.2 Policy Implications for International Education

The cultural anchoring model carries significant implications for international education policy and institutional practice. If international students are recognized as potential cultural anchors, then the goals of international education extend beyond academic training and degree conferral to encompass the deliberate cultivation of cultural anchoring capacity.

This reconceptualization implies several specific policy recommendations. First, universities should design cultural immersion programs that go beyond surface-level cultural tourism to facilitate deep, embodied engagement with Chinese culture. Community-based learning, homestay programs, cultural apprenticeships, and service learning can provide the intensive cultural contact that generates embodied cultural capital. Second, institutions should support international students' identity development as bicultural mediators through reflective practices—such as cultural journals, mentoring programs, and intercultural dialogue groups—that encourage students to process their cultural encounters and integrate them into coherent bicultural narratives.

Third, universities should invest in alumni engagement strategies that maintain and strengthen returnees' connections to China and to Chinese cultural resources. Alumni networks, continuing education opportunities, virtual cultural events, and professional exchange programs can sustain the cultural anchoring effect over time and prevent the erosion of cultural capital that may occur when returnees lose contact with Chinese cultural environments. Fourth, the model suggests that international education policy should attend not only to the quantity of international students but also to the quality of their cultural engagement—specifically, to the conditions that enable effective cultural capital accumulation and identity transformation. Zhang's (2025) ^[28] analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative's cultural-economic interaction supports this recommendation, suggesting that the long-term cultural communication returns of international education investment may exceed the immediate educational benefits.

6.3 Implications for Cultural Communication Strategy

For cultural communication policymakers, the model suggests a paradigm shift from institutional broadcasting to relational cultivation. Rather than relying primarily on top-down cultural transmission through Confucius Institutes, state media, and cultural diplomacy events, cultural communication strategy should recognize and support the decentralized, grassroots anchoring effects of international students and other sojourners.

This shift aligns with Deng and Zhao's (2025) ^[29] intersubjectivity framework, which emphasizes the relational rather than unidirectional character of effective cultural communication. International student cultural anchors offer a form of cultural communication that is inherently relational—it occurs within existing social relationships, is responsive to the specific interests and questions of community members, and carries the credibility of personal experience and trusted social connection.

The model also suggests that cultural communication evaluation frameworks should incorporate longitudinal metrics that capture the delayed and distributed effects of cultural anchoring. Unlike institutional communication events whose effects can be measured immediately, cultural anchoring operates through slow, cumulative processes that unfold over years and decades. Evaluation frameworks that focus exclusively on short-term reach and impact metrics may underestimate the cultural communication value of international education investments.

7. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cultural anchoring model is theoretical and awaits empirical validation through the proposed research design. The model's propositions, while grounded in established theory, have not been tested with actual data from international student populations.

Second, the model focuses primarily on international students who return to their home countries, and may not fully account for students who remain in China or migrate to third countries. The cultural anchoring dynamics of these populations may differ in significant ways, and future research should extend the model to encompass diverse post-graduation trajectories.

Third, the model does not fully address the role of digital media in sustaining and amplifying cultural anchoring effects. While digital platforms enable returnees to maintain connections with China and to share cultural content with broad audiences, the specific affordances and limitations of different platforms for cultural anchoring warrant dedicated investigation. Deng and Zhao's (2025) ^[4] analysis of intelligent media technology suggests that algorithmic systems may shape the visibility and reach of returnee cultural content in ways that deserve further theorization.

Fourth, the model's emphasis on positive cultural anchoring effects should be balanced by attention to negative outcomes, resistance, and counter-narratives. Not all international student experiences produce positive cultural perceptions, and some returnees may actively challenge rather than support positive cultural understanding. Future research should investigate the conditions that produce negative anchoring and develop strategies to mitigate such effects.

Promising directions for future research include: comparative studies of cultural anchoring across different host countries and cultural contexts; investigation of the intergenerational transmission of cultural anchoring effects (whether returnees' children and students inherit cultural anchoring dispositions); examination of institutional and organizational cultural anchoring (how returnees

influence their workplaces and professional fields); and development of quantitative instruments specifically designed to measure cultural anchoring effects.

8. Conclusion

This paper has proposed the concept of the international student as "cultural anchor"—a mediating subject who stabilizes, embodies, and transmits Chinese cultural meaning within transnational social fields. The cultural anchoring model traces a three-phase trajectory from cultural capital accumulation through identity reconstruction to relational network activation, identifying the conditions and mechanisms through which international students become effective agents of cross-cultural understanding.

The model's central contribution is its reconceptualization of the relationship between international education and cultural communication. Rather than treating these as separate domains—one concerned with individual learning and development, the other with national cultural strategy—the model demonstrates that they are fundamentally interconnected through the cultural anchoring agency of international students. Every international student who returns home carrying embodied cultural knowledge, a bicultural perspective, and active transnational relationships is a potential cultural anchor: a living point of reference through which their community can access, understand, and engage with Chinese culture.

In an era of increasing geopolitical complexity and cultural polarization, the cultural anchoring function of international students takes on heightened significance. As Yao (2026) ^[2] noted, the global landscape of cultural communication is being reshaped by forces that simultaneously create opportunities and obstacles for cross-cultural understanding. In this context, the hundreds of thousands of international students who have studied in China represent a vast, largely untapped resource for authentic, relational, and sustainable cultural communication—not as instruments of cultural propaganda, but as genuine bridges of human understanding built on the foundation of lived experience and personal integrity.

The theoretical framework and research design proposed in this paper provide a foundation for systematic investigation of this phenomenon. By illuminating the mechanisms through which international students become cultural anchors, and by identifying the conditions that strengthen or weaken this process, future research can inform more effective and more humane approaches to both international education and cultural communication in the twenty-first century.

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