

## **A Study on the Construction of Cultural Identity of Chinese Students Studying Abroad under the "Belt and Road" Initiative**

**Zefeng Wang<sup>1,2,3,#,\*</sup>, Ying Zhang<sup>1,#</sup>, Shufen Ma<sup>1</sup>, Xia Han<sup>2</sup>, Jean-Marie Nianga<sup>2,3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*College of Engineering, College of Teacher Education, Huzhou University, Huzhou, Zhejiang, China*

<sup>2</sup>*IEIP, Institute of Education and Innovation in Paris, Paris, France*

<sup>3</sup>*Sino-Congolese Foundation for Development, Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo*

<sup>#</sup>*These Authors Contributed Equally to This Work.*

<sup>\*</sup>*Corresponding Author.*

**Abstract:** The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, a centennial plan, are significantly displaying Chinese civilization worldwide. The dissemination of civilization is merely a process, while the recognition of civilization enables the world to breathe in unison with China, share a common destiny, and connect hearts and minds. The alignment of people's hearts and minds is achieved through righteousness and justice. In this context, how to promote China and gain global recognition is one of the core tasks of China's diplomacy, united front work, and the long-term implementation of the Belt and Road strategy. International students coming to China for study are an important force in spreading Chinese civilization, values, and the Chinese model to the outside world. While imparting scientific and cultural knowledge, schools need to conduct implicit cultural education to establish correct values and worldviews. It is essential to cultivate international students' recognition of Chinese culture, Chinese territory, and the path of development with Chinese characteristics. The aim is to ignite a spark that can start a prairie fire, laying a foundation for building a friendship of "long-term coexistence, mutual supervision, mutual trust, and shared honor and disgrace" between China and the world in the future.

**Keywords:** International Students; Chinese culture; Cultural Identity

**1. The Current State of Cultural Identity Education Domestically and Internationally**

With the steady growth of China's economy and the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, China is increasing its economic investments globally and striving to establish and maintain its international influence. In this process, facing the challenges of the existing international interest system and external criticism, China needs to build an international support network, expand global awareness and acceptance of China's development model, and enhance its soft power. The endeavor of studying in China, as a crucial component of China's education system, plays a significant role in jointly constructing the Belt and Road Initiative. It not only enhances the international influence of Chinese education but also promotes understanding and friendship between Chinese and foreign people. This effort has made remarkable contributions to helping developing countries cultivate the professional talents needed for economic and social development [1]. Providing cultural education to international students in China can enhance their understanding and recognition of Chinese culture and development paths. It can also cultivate international talents who may become bridges between China and their home countries in the future, thereby building a more positive international image. Therefore, exploring and implementing effective cultural education for international students in China has an indispensable strategic significance for promoting international exchanges and cooperation and enhancing China's influence on the global stage.

Cultural identity is "the tendency for consensus and recognition among humans regarding culture" [2]. It is also "the evaluation and judgment of different cultural

groups regarding their own culture and its relationship with other cultures." Western scholars believe that cultural identity is the recognition or confirmation of self-image. Research on cultural identity in China began with Mr. Fei's proposal of the "pluralistic and integrated" cultural concept [3]. Cultural identity can be viewed, on one hand, as the confirmation of self-image, and on the other hand, as the mutual familiarity, acceptance, internalization, and ultimately the practice of different cultures. For international students coming to China, cultural identity primarily pertains to the latter.

Most universities in China approach the recognition of Chinese culture by international students from the perspective of second language acquisition. From the perspective of second language acquisition, cultural identity involves the acceptance and recognition of different cultural characteristics. It specifically includes three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The School of International Education at Guangxi Normal University has conducted cultural identity education focused on Chinese dragon and lion culture for ASEAN students [4]. Thirty ASEAN students were selected as research subjects, and a 12-week dragon and lion dance training program was developed. The course was conducted through a combination of theoretical and practical sessions, including participation in various dragon and lion dance activities and competitions. Methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and participant observation were used to collect relevant data. A longitudinal comparison was made of the attitudes of ASEAN students towards Chinese dragon and lion culture before and after participating in the training. The analysis revealed that although students highly appreciated the activities, their understanding mostly remained at the level of festival events, with limited comprehension of the cultural significance of the practices. Due to differences in national conditions, culture, and needs, cultural identity education in developed foreign countries primarily focuses on "guidance" at the spiritual level. For example, the United States promotes the "American Dream" of freedom, and France considers anyone who recognizes the spirit of "liberty, democracy, and fraternity" as French.

As a multi-ethnic immigrant society, Singapore constructs its national consciousness and identity based on its national ideology. It addresses the lack of national identity through a combination of media as the primary means and national curriculum interventions as secondary support, utilizing civic education to reinforce national identity [5].

## **2. The Current State of Cultural Identity Among International Students in China**

According to data released by the Ministry of Education on April 12, 2019, the number of international students in China reached 492,185 in 2018. These students came from 196 countries and regions and were distributed across 1,004 higher education institutions in 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities nationwide [6]. This data reflects China's significant position and attractiveness in the field of international education. The Chinese education department strengthened the institutional framework and innovated mechanisms for opening up education to the outside world, striving to improve the quality of studying in China. Additionally, several policies were introduced, such as the "Administrative Measures for the Enrollment and Training of International Students by Schools" and the "Quality Standards for Higher Education of International Students in China (Trial)," aimed at standardizing the conditions for universities to enroll international students, optimizing the structure of international students, and continuously improving the quality supervision system for international education in China.

After that, international education will further integrate into China's long-term development strategy. This provides a solid foundation and opportunity for the cultural education of international students in China, which is crucial for fostering their recognition of Chinese culture and development models.

However, there are certain issues generally present in the recognition of China and its development path among international students in China. Through surveys conducted on the awareness, current state of recognition, and needs of the international student community regarding Chinese culture, statistics reveal the current level of Chinese

cultural awareness among international students in Chinese universities: 2.06% are completely unaware, 5.60% are very aware, 22.12% have a little understanding, 26.84% are somewhat aware, and 43.36% have a general understanding. It is evident that only a small portion of international students have a relatively good understanding of Chinese culture. The majority have only a superficial knowledge, knowing some surface-level phenomena without understanding the essence, let alone identifying with it.

Interviews revealed that these students generally lack in-depth knowledge of various cultural aspects, including China's national conditions, geography, ideology, historical religions, education system, classical literature, technological achievements, traditional architecture, and literature and arts. More often, they have a shallow or no understanding at all. Currently, the overall recognition of Chinese culture among international students is severely lacking. Without sufficient understanding of Chinese culture, there can be no talk of identifying with China's development path. Students cultivated by Chinese universities, who do not have a sense of recognition towards China, cannot effectively aid in global recognition of China and its development path when they return to their home countries. This is regrettable and a loss of resources.

Therefore, conducting in-depth research on cultural education regarding the recognition of Chinese culture and China's development path among international students is profoundly meaningful. While disseminating technical knowledge and nurturing talents for the world, it also supports the development of China's soft power on the international stage and the spread of positive energy about China in the long term.

### **3. Theoretical Basis for Cultural Identity of International Students in China**

In the discussion of cultural education for recognizing China, emphasizing the foundational and operable aspects of cultural identity is key. Although international students in China have a certain degree of cultural recognition, cultural identity relies not only on a profound cultural background but also on the integration of cultural soft power. Chinese traditional culture, as the core

of China's soft power, is embodied in the core value system and harmonious culture, making this unique "Chinese culture" a symbol of identity in the world's multicultural landscape. From the perspective of identity education psychology, Chinese cultural elements and spiritual elements that easily attract recognition from international students have three main characteristics:

**Powerful and Convincing Elements:** These are cultural contents that easily evoke cultural admiration. For instance, African students may focus on and identify with non-colonial forms such as "Zheng He's voyages to the West" and "Tribute of all Nations." Similarly, some Japanese and Korean students may resonate with Wang Yangming's philosophy of "unity of knowledge and action."

**Elements Lacking in the Students' Home Countries:** Examples include China's tea culture and martial arts culture, which may not be prevalent in their home countries and hence draw interest and recognition.

**Root Elements:** These are historical and cultural elements that connect to the students' heritage or history. For example, West Asian students might be interested in the history of interactions between the Han Chinese and western ethnic minorities, sometimes even tracing their ethnic origins within Chinese history.

In cultural education within the classroom, it is necessary to flexibly integrate these elements to achieve educational goals. Among the three types of cultural elements, the third type—root elements—is relatively more challenging and can potentially produce counterproductive effects if not properly guided. For instance, some Southeast Asian students might have a historical perception, influenced by biased historical education in their own countries, that the Han people oppressed and bullied them for thousands of years.

The cultural identity of international students in China involves not just learning the Chinese language or participating in traditional cultural activities but also an in-depth understanding and interest in both traditional and modern Chinese culture. Simply learning the language is insufficient to construct cultural identity; rather, interest and participation in cultural elements are crucial to the formation of recognition.

For instance, how many university students who obtained the CET-4 certificate in China have cultural recognition of the UK, despite learning English from elementary school or even kindergarten? Conversely, how many teenagers who favor Japanese or Korean culture fell in love with it because of their study of Japanese or Korean languages? More likely, their fascination with traditional or modern cultural exports, such as an interest in Kabuki or an obsession with Japanese or Korean anime, led to their cultural recognition.

Similarly, international students' attitudes and expectations toward learning Chinese differ; their interest in Chinese culture often surpasses their interest in learning the Chinese language. Comparatively, in English-speaking countries, Chinese students often develop a recognition of the host country's culture through their efforts in studying and living abroad. This phenomenon indicates that the formation of cultural identity is a complex and profound process that transcends mere language learning, delving into the core and essence of the culture.

#### **4. Practical Strategies for Constructing Cultural Identity among International Students in China**

Effective practical strategies are crucial for enhancing the cultural identity of international students in China. It is essential to deeply understand the cultural backgrounds and needs of international students while fully showcasing the diversity and inclusiveness of Chinese culture. By innovating educational methods, such as combining modern technology with traditional culture, we can effectively stimulate international students' interest and recognition of Chinese culture. Strengthening cultural exchange activities and providing immersive cultural experiences are also key to promoting cultural identity.

##### **4.1 Deeply Explore Common Elements in the Classroom**

To enhance the cultural identity of international students in China, integrating cultural education into the classroom is essential. Combining traditional culture with modern scientific education can showcase the profound heritage and scientific wisdom of Chinese culture. This approach can subtly

guide international students to appreciate the unique charm and philosophical thoughts of Chinese culture, thereby strengthening their understanding and recognition of it, and fostering cultural identity.

In data mining classes for science and engineering students, the origins and changes of Chinese surnames can be studied. Dynamic data visualization can show the migration of ancestors with various surnames, subtly demonstrating that the cultures surrounding China, including those of West Asia, are actually part of Chinese culture. The shared ancestry indicates that some ancestors migrated to Southeast Asia, West Asia, and other surrounding areas over the course of history. Classical texts or research evidence can be introduced, such as the "Classic of Mountains and Seas" which mentions that the Qiang and the Xia people share the same ancestry, all tracing back to the Yellow Emperor; or theories on the origins of the Turks from "Miscellaneous Hu in Pingliang" and "Beishan in Gaochang"; and the assertion in "The Origin of the Vietnamese Nation" that the Luoyue, a branch of the Baiyue, are the direct ancestors of the Vietnamese, residing in the northern plains of Vietnam and the area north of the central plain. Starting from the concept of shared origins, using the intersection of data and history, ideological and political education content can be integrated to create a resonance with Chinese culture.

In chemistry classes, various famous Chinese teas can be chemically analyzed, first demonstrating the efficacy and wisdom of these teas using scientific methods. Then, the content of tea culture, including tea ceremonies, tea virtues, and tea arts, can be introduced. This approach not only showcases the richness of traditional Chinese culture but also subtly conveys the philosophical elements of Chinese tea culture (such as tranquility, harmony, and elegance). This cultural education can help international students subconsciously recognize the Chinese philosophy of nurturing the mind through tranquility, valuing harmony, and pursuing elegance, which contrasts sharply with some Western philosophies and emphasizes inclusivity and openness.

Enhancing global recognition of China's territorial integrity is a crucial aspect of

China's current diplomatic strategy. China needs global support for its unity and territorial integrity, especially when facing provocations from anti-China forces on territorial issues. International students in China are prime candidates for building this recognition and serve as an important channel for China to voice its stance internationally. In data analysis courses, reviewing the territorial changes of China after the Qin unification and the changes in the territories of world countries can help international graduate students deeply understand and recognize China's territorial integrity. It is particularly recommended to include the changes in the world colonial map since the Age of Exploration, helping foreign students deeply understand the different interpretations of power and methods of external influence between China and Western powers. Additionally, including the changes in Chinese territory after the Opium War due to Western colonial invasions can allow students from third-world countries to relate to their own national histories, creating empathy and resonance. This approach can help them deeply understand and support China's efforts to maintain national unity and territorial integrity from a historical and factual perspective.

#### **4.2 Enhancing Cultural Identity of International Students by Combining Modern Technology with Traditional Culture**

In constructing the cultural identity of international students in China, combining modern technology with traditional culture can be highly effective. For example, using Virtual Reality (VR) technology, immersive cultural experiences can be created, allowing students to virtually visit historical landmarks like the Forbidden City and the Great Wall. This method provides a vivid and direct understanding of the richness of Chinese culture.

Additionally, showcasing traditional arts through digital means, such as interactive software that allows students to experience the process of Chinese calligraphy and traditional painting, can lower the barriers to cultural dissemination while enhancing the enjoyment and engagement of the cultural experience. Furthermore, establishing online

cultural exchange platforms can promote direct communication and interaction between international and Chinese students. Through social media, students can share information about traditional Chinese festivals and customs, providing a broader space for cultural exchange. These platforms not only offer language and cultural learning resources but also foster cross-cultural understanding and friendship.

Through these methods, international students can gain a deeper understanding of Chinese history and culture while experiencing the unique charm that the combination of traditional culture and modern technology brings. This innovative educational approach enhances cultural identity and demonstrates the openness and inclusiveness of Chinese culture, effectively promoting mutual respect and understanding of cultural diversity.

#### **4.3 Empirical Comparison to Appreciate the Superiority of China's Development Path**

In recent years, although China has been downplaying ideological issues in foreign media, several developed countries, such as those in the "Five Eyes" alliance, have been emphasizing these issues and using them as a means to isolate China. Therefore, China needs to make certain measures.

For international students from slowly developing third-world countries, it is essential to plant the seeds of recognition for the Chinese development path in their hearts. This recognition not only helps them appreciate China's development model but also opens their minds to the possibility that the Chinese model might be applicable in other countries, potentially contributing to a new global order in the coming century.

In big data courses for science and engineering, various economic development-related data indicators from countries around the world over the past 30 years can be analyzed. These indicators include national electricity consumption, GDP, per capita income, and stock market trends. By integrating data on China's rapid development in various fields since the reform and opening-up, students can be convinced of the effectiveness of China's development path from a factual perspective.

It is recommended to highlight data that has



been misrepresented or fabricated by foreign media, such as the comparison of defense budgets between China and the United States, per capita carbon emissions between China and Western countries, historical data on China's fight against COVID-19, and comparisons of COVID-19 pandemic data with other countries. This approach can correct misconceptions.

In the classroom, the focus should be on teaching data processing methods, data crawling, and analysis, with students conducting these operations in laboratory sessions. This allows international students to see a different perspective of the world they may not have been aware of previously, while also gaining a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of China's actual development.

### **5. Conclusion and Future Prospects**

Ideological and political education for international students is not only a part of education but also a significant force supporting the United Front, Chinese diplomacy, and China's strategic positioning in the future global landscape. In the face of the current severe international situation and the predicted multipolar collisions over the next twenty years, China needs friends who understand, comprehend, and recognize China. Therefore, cultural education for international students is essential. It is crucial to foster their recognition of China in terms of culture, territorial integrity, and the development path with Chinese characteristics.

International students serve as mediators of multicultural exchange. While learning the Chinese language and scientific and cultural knowledge, they can subtly develop recognition of China through cultural education, becoming better ambassadors of Chinese civilization and bridges for spreading Chinese culture.

By continually improving the methods and content of cultural education for international students, China can ensure that these students

leave with a deep and genuine understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture and values.

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