

International Students in China as Micro-Narrators of Chinese Culture: A Theoretical Framework for Digital Cross-Cultural Communication

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Abstract: *As international student mobility to China continues to grow, international students have increasingly become active producers and disseminators of cultural narratives about China through digital media platforms. This paper proposes a theoretical framework for understanding how international students in China generate, disseminate, and influence cross-cultural understanding through "micro-narratives"—short-form, personal, and emotionally resonant cultural content shared via social media. Drawing on recent developments in Chinese cultural communication scholarship and established Western theories of narrative, intercultural adaptation, and participatory culture, the framework integrates three interconnected mechanisms: embodied experience activation, narrative framing selection, and platform-mediated amplification. The model addresses the gap between macro-level cultural communication strategy research and micro-level understanding of individual communicative agency, and proposes a mixed-methods research design for empirical validation. This study contributes a new theoretical lens for understanding international students as grassroots agents of cross-cultural communication in an increasingly digital and participatory media environment.*

Keywords: *international students; Chinese cultural communication; micro-narratives; cross-cultural communication; digital media; embodied experience*

1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education in China has undergone remarkable expansion over the past two decades. According to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report ^[1], China has emerged as one of the world's leading host countries for international students, attracting learners from over 190 countries and regions. The "Study in China" initiative, supported by the Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative, has particularly accelerated the influx of students from Southeast Asian, Central Asian, and African nations, creating an unprecedented landscape of cross-cultural encounter on Chinese university campuses.

Concurrently, China has placed increasing emphasis on international cultural communication as a strategic national priority. Recent scholarship has articulated the theoretical foundations of Chinese cultural communication from multiple perspectives, including global cultural configuration ^[2], and value logic and strategic pathways ^[3]. Yao (2026) ^[4] proposed a "tripartite model" of Chinese cultural communication in the context of globalization, encompassing local, national, and transnational dimensions. These macro-level frameworks have provided essential theoretical scaffolding for understanding China's cultural communication strategy.

However, a significant gap persists between these institutional-level theories and the lived communicative practices of individuals who inhabit the intersection of cultures. International students in China—who live, study, and engage with Chinese society on a daily basis—represent a uniquely positioned group of cultural mediators. Unlike institutional actors such as Confucius Institutes or state media, international students communicate their cultural experiences through informal, personal, and often digital channels. Their social media posts, short videos, blog entries, and casual conversations with family and friends back home constitute a vast, decentralized network of cultural narratives that operate outside formal communication frameworks.

The concept of "micro-narrative" ^[5] provides a particularly apt theoretical lens for understanding this phenomenon. Unlike grand narratives of national identity or cultural heritage, micro-narratives are characterized by their brevity, personal resonance, and platform-native format. They are the short video of an international student's first experience with Chinese calligraphy, the Instagram story documenting

a visit to a local tea house, or the TikTok clip capturing the sensory overload of a Chinese night market. These narratives, though individually modest, collectively constitute a powerful force in shaping cross-cultural understanding—precisely because they are perceived as authentic, unmediated, and emotionally genuine (cf. Deng and Lin, 2025^[6]; Zhou, 2025^[7]).

This paper addresses the following research questions: (1) How do international students in China generate cultural micro-narratives through their embodied experiences and digital media practices? (2) What are the patterns and mechanisms of micro-narrative dissemination through digital platforms? (3) How do these micro-narratives contribute to cross-cultural understanding and perception change among overseas audiences? To answer these questions, the paper develops an integrated theoretical framework that synthesizes Chinese cultural communication theory, micro-narrative theory, intercultural adaptation theory, and participatory culture theory.

The significance of this study is threefold. First, it bridges the gap between macro-level cultural communication strategy and micro-level communicative practice by centering the individual international student as a communicative agent. Second, it extends micro-narrative theory from its current application in institutional communication to the domain of individual cross-cultural experience. Third, it provides a research design framework for empirical validation that can inform both cultural communication policy and international education practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Chinese Cultural Communication: Current Scholarship and Gaps

The study of Chinese cultural communication has evolved substantially over the past decade, reflecting China's growing prominence in global cultural exchange. The literature can be broadly categorized into four strands. The first strand addresses macro-level strategic frameworks. Yao (2026)^[4] proposed a "tripartite model" that examines Chinese cultural communication through local, national, and transnational dimensions under globalization. Sun (2025)^[2] analyzed the shaping of the global cultural landscape and China's emerging role within it, while Zhang (2024)^[3] articulated the value logic and strategic pathways for cultural communication in the new era. Yu and Lei (2023)^[8] identified the value "axis" and focal points of Chinese cultural communication. Li and Yin (2024)^[9] introduced the concept of "symbiotic translation communication" as a new approach to Chinese cultural outreach under the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind. Jiang and Hua (2023)^[10] explored the practical orientations for cultural communication against the backdrop of de-globalization.

The second strand focuses on media technology and communication channels. Deng and Zhao (2025)^[11] traced the evolutionary trajectory of Chinese external cultural communication through the lens of media change, developing a discourse system framework that accounts for technological transformation. Their companion studies further elaborated on intelligent media technology as an enabler of precise international communication^[12], embodied media channels and interpersonal communication from a media materiality perspective^[13], and relationship reconstruction from an intersubjectivity perspective^[14]. Chen (2025)^[15] examined the cross-cultural value of culture-laden objects in international communication capacity building.

The third strand concerns narrative strategies and content creation. Zhang, Lv and Si (2025)^[5] developed the concept of "micro-narrative" for international communication, arguing that short-form, personal, and emotionally resonant content can achieve greater cross-cultural penetration than traditional macro-narratives. Deng and Lin (2025)^[6] examined story-based narrative strategies in YouTube videos about rural China, demonstrating how storytelling conventions shape cross-cultural perception. Zhou (2025)^[7] proposed schema conversion and narrative innovation as practical pathways for Chinese cultural communication, while Lin, Wei and Li (2025)^[16] analyzed cross-cultural symbol usage through the case of Disney's "Mulan" film series from a transcultural communication perspective.

The fourth strand examines cultural carriers and audience reception. Meng and Liu (2024)^[17] introduced the concept of "cultural anchoring objects" and provided empirical evidence from ASEAN youth regarding their effectiveness. Zhang (2025)^[18] examined the interactive mechanisms between cultural communication and economic cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, while Liu (2023)^[19] and Zhu (2023)^[20] discussed the role of education and Chinese language education in cultural communication, respectively.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, three critical limitations persist. First, the literature has

predominantly focused on institutional and state-level actors as agents of cultural communication, with limited attention to individual communicative agency. International students in China, who number in the hundreds of thousands and engage daily with Chinese culture, have been largely absent from theoretical models of cultural communication. Second, the intersection of micro-narrative theory^[5] with digital media affordances remains underdeveloped. While individual studies have addressed micro-narrative construction and smart media technology separately, their convergence in the context of international student communication has not been explored. Third, empirical studies remain scarce—with the notable exception of Meng and Liu (2024)^[17], whose survey of ASEAN youth represents one of few empirically grounded studies in this domain—limiting the evidence base for theoretical claims.

2.2 Micro-Narrative Theory and Cross-Cultural Communication

The concept of micro-narrative has roots in both Western narrative theory and Chinese communication scholarship. Bruner (1991)^[21] argued that narrative is not merely a mode of representation but a fundamental mechanism through which humans construct reality itself. His distinction between the "paradigmatic" and "narrative" modes of thought established that cultural knowledge and identity are constructed through storytelling—an insight particularly relevant to cross-cultural contexts where competing narratives vie for legitimacy and resonance. Georgakopoulou (2006)^[22] advanced the concept of "small stories" as a counterpoint to dominant narrative analysis paradigms, arguing that everyday narrative practices—fragmented, emergent, and interactionally situated—offer a more nuanced account of how meaning is constructed in social interaction.

In the Chinese communication literature, Zhang, Lv and Si (2025)^[5] formalized "micro-narrative" as a distinct theoretical construct for international communication. They argued that the characteristics of micro-narratives—brevity, personal perspective, emotional resonance, and platform-native format—enable them to achieve cross-cultural penetration that macro-narratives of national identity and cultural heritage often cannot. Their "multi-dimensional construction" framework identifies three dimensions of micro-narrative production: content selection (what cultural elements to narrate), framing strategy (how to position the narrative), and platform adaptation (how to optimize for specific media environments).

Jenkins' (2006)^[23] theory of participatory culture provides a complementary framework. In the digital media environment, ordinary individuals are not merely passive consumers of cultural content but active producers and circulators of cultural meaning. This shift from a "read-only" to a "read-write" culture has profound implications for cultural communication, as it democratizes the production of cultural narratives and enables voices that exist outside institutional frameworks to achieve significant reach and influence. For international students, the participatory culture of social media platforms means that their personal experiences of cultural encounter can be instantly recorded, curated, and disseminated to audiences spanning multiple countries and cultural contexts.

The intersection of micro-narrative theory and cross-cultural communication is further enriched by Zhou's (2025)^[7] concept of "schema conversion"—the process by which cultural content is reframed to align with the cognitive schemas of target audiences. For international students creating cultural content, schema conversion operates at multiple levels: they must translate their lived experience in China into forms that are intelligible and engaging to audiences in their home countries, while simultaneously navigating the cultural assumptions and expectations of both cultures.

2.3 International Students as Cultural Mediators

Research on international student mobility has extensively documented the transformative effects of study abroad experiences on intercultural development. Ward, Bochner, and Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001)^[24] established a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of cross-cultural transition, distinguishing between "culture learning" and "stress and coping" approaches to adaptation. Kim's (2001)^[25] 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 outcomes. Berry's (1997)^[26] acculturation framework identified four strategies—integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization—that individuals may adopt in response to cultural contact.

These theoretical frameworks have primarily focused on what international students gain from their experiences—intercultural competence, personal growth, linguistic proficiency—rather than what they produce as communicative agents. Yet international students are not merely recipients of cultural influence; they are active interpreters and transmitters of cultural meaning. The concept of "sojourner"

communication competence ^[25] acknowledges that temporary residents develop the ability to mediate between cultures, but the communicative output of this mediation—the narratives, images, and stories that international students create and share—remains undertheorized.

Liu's (2023) ^[19] examination of education as a channel for Chinese cultural communication represents one of the few studies that explicitly addresses the intersection of international education and cultural communication. Liu argued that educational institutions serve as "cultural communication nodes" where cross-cultural understanding is fostered through structured and unstructured interactions. Zhu (2023) ^[20] further discussed how Chinese language education integrates cultural transmission, though the focus remained primarily on curriculum design rather than student-generated communication.

The rise of social media has fundamentally altered the communicative landscape for international students. Research by Godwin-Jones (2013) ^[27] and Lee (2011) ^[28] on digital storytelling in study abroad contexts has demonstrated that digital platforms enable students to document, reflect upon, and share their cross-cultural experiences in real time. However, these studies have primarily focused on the learning benefits of digital storytelling for the students themselves, rather than its cross-cultural communication effects on broader audiences. This paper extends this literature by conceptualizing international students not merely as digital storytellers but as "micro-narrators" whose cultural narratives function as agents of cross-cultural communication.

3. Theoretical Framework

Building on the literature reviewed above, this section develops an integrated theoretical framework for understanding international students in China as micro-narrators of Chinese culture. The framework operates at three levels: a generation mechanism model that explains how cultural micro-narratives are produced; a dissemination pathway model that traces how these narratives circulate through digital networks; and an efficacy assessment model that evaluates the impact of micro-narratives on cross-cultural perception. These three components are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, forming a dynamic system of cultural communication.

3.1 The Generation Mechanism Model

The generation of cultural micro-narratives by international students involves three interacting elements: embodied cultural experience, cognitive-affective processing, and digital mediation. Each element draws on distinct theoretical traditions while contributing to an integrated understanding of narrative production.

Embodied cultural experience constitutes the foundational substrate of micro-narrative generation. The concept of "embodiment" in cognitive science emphasizes that knowledge and meaning are constructed through bodily engagement with the environment rather than through abstract cognitive processing alone ^[29]. Deng and Zhao (2025) ^[13] extended this insight to cultural communication through their concept of "embodied media channels," arguing that physical, sensory, and interpersonal experiences constitute a distinct communication modality. For international students, embodied cultural experiences include participation in cultural practices (calligraphy, martial arts, cooking), navigation of everyday life (shopping, transportation, social interactions), and engagement with cultural spaces (museums, temples, historical sites). These experiences are inherently narrative-generative because they produce sensory and emotional responses that demand articulation.

Meng and Liu's (2024) ^[17] concept of "cultural anchoring objects"—tangible artifacts that serve as focal points for cultural understanding—is particularly relevant here. International students encounter numerous cultural anchoring objects in their daily lives, from Chinese food and clothing to architectural forms and social customs. These objects function as narrative catalysts: they are concrete enough to be photographed, described, and shared, yet rich enough in cultural significance to generate meaningful narrative content. The encounter with a cultural anchoring object—for instance, a student's first experience with a Chinese tea ceremony—creates what Zhou (2025) ^[7] termed a "schema disruption," a moment when existing cognitive frameworks are challenged, prompting the individual to construct new meaning through narrative.

The second element, cognitive-affective processing, involves the reflective transformation of experience into narratable form. Not all cultural experiences generate communicable narratives; the process of narrative construction requires cognitive engagement with experience—what Kim (2001) ^[25]

termed "host communication competence" and what Ward et al. (2001) ^[24] described as "culture learning." International students who actively reflect on their cultural encounters, compare them with their pre-existing cultural schemas, and articulate their insights develop richer and more nuanced micro-narratives than those who remain in a state of unreflective immersion.

The affective dimension is equally significant. Berry's (1997) ^[26] acculturation framework suggests that emotional responses to cultural contact—ranging from fascination and delight to confusion and frustration—serve as motivational drivers for narrative production. International students who experience strong emotional responses to their cultural encounters are more likely to produce and share narratives, and these narratives tend to be more vivid and engaging precisely because they convey genuine emotional experience (cf. Bruner, 1991 ^[21]). The affective authenticity of micro-narratives is a key factor in their cross-cultural effectiveness: audiences can distinguish between emotionally genuine personal accounts and institutionally produced promotional content.

The third element, digital mediation, encompasses the technological platforms and tools through which embodied experiences are transformed into shareable narratives. Jenkins' (2006) ^[23] participatory culture theory highlights how digital platforms have democratized cultural production, enabling ordinary individuals to create and distribute content that was previously the domain of professional communicators. For international students, platforms such as TikTok (Douyin), YouTube, Instagram, WeChat Moments, and Facebook provide distinct affordances that shape the form and content of their cultural narratives. The short-form video format of TikTok encourages spontaneous, visually driven narratives; the longer-form format of YouTube enables more reflective and detailed storytelling; and the image-centric format of Instagram emphasizes aesthetic and atmospheric cultural impressions. The choice of platform thus mediates not only the distribution of narratives but also their very construction.

3.2 The Dissemination Pathway Model

The dissemination of cultural micro-narratives involves three interconnected mechanisms: narrative selection and framing, platform amplification, and cross-cultural resonance.

Narrative selection and framing constitutes the first mechanism in the dissemination pathway. International students exercise agency in choosing which aspects of their cultural experience to narrate and how to frame them. Zhou's (2025) ^[7] concept of "schema conversion" is instructive here: students intuitively or consciously adapt their narratives to align with the cognitive schemas and cultural expectations of their intended audiences. A student creating content for a Southeast Asian audience might emphasize similarities between Chinese and local cultural practices, while one addressing a Western audience might foreground cultural contrasts and novelty. This framing process involves what Zhang, Lv and Si (2025) ^[5] identified as the three dimensions of micro-narrative construction: content selection, framing strategy, and platform adaptation.

The second mechanism, platform amplification, concerns how algorithmic systems shape the reach and visibility of cultural micro-narratives. Deng and Zhao's (2025) ^[12] analysis of intelligent media technology for precise cultural communication highlights how recommendation algorithms, engagement metrics, and content distribution systems can amplify or constrain the circulation of cultural content. The algorithmic logic of platforms such as TikTok prioritizes content that generates high engagement (views, likes, shares, comments), which tends to favor narratives that are visually striking, emotionally resonant, or culturally surprising. This creates a selection environment in which certain types of cultural micro-narratives achieve viral dissemination while others remain relatively invisible. Understanding this algorithmic mediation is essential for theorizing the actual reach and impact of international student narratives.

The third mechanism, cross-cultural resonance, refers to the capacity of micro-narratives to engage audiences across cultural boundaries. Resonance depends on the narrative's ability to bridge cultural distance—to present Chinese cultural content in ways that connect with the values, emotions, and experiences of audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Deng and Zhao's (2025) ^[14] intersubjectivity framework suggests that effective cross-cultural communication requires the establishment of shared communicative ground between narrator and audience. International students are uniquely positioned to achieve this because they occupy a dual perspective: they understand both the cultural context of their host country and the cultural frameworks of their home audiences. This dual perspective enables them to function as "cultural translators" (cf. Meng and Liu, 2024 ^[17])—not in the linguistic sense, but in the deeper sense of rendering one cultural world intelligible and meaningful within the terms of another.

Lin, Wei and Li's (2025) ^[16] analysis of Disney's "Mulan" provides a cautionary parallel: when cultural symbols are appropriated and reframed without deep cultural understanding, the resulting narratives may achieve commercial success but fail to communicate authentic cultural meaning. International student micro-narratives, by contrast, carry the authority of lived experience—they are not secondhand appropriations but firsthand accounts that convey the complexity, contradictions, and surprises of genuine cultural encounter.

3.3 The Efficacy Assessment Model

Assessing the cross-cultural communication efficacy of micro-narratives requires a multi-dimensional approach that captures both quantitative reach and qualitative impact. This paper proposes a three-level efficacy model drawing on established evaluation frameworks in communication studies.

The first level, cognitive impact, measures the extent to which micro-narratives increase audience knowledge about Chinese culture. This can be operationalized through pre- and post-exposure measures of cultural knowledge, awareness of specific cultural practices, and recognition of cultural symbols. Chen's (2025) ^[15] discussion of "culture-laden objects" in international communication provides a theoretical basis for identifying which cultural elements are most effectively transmitted through micro-narratives.

The second level, affective impact, assesses changes in audience attitudes and emotional dispositions toward Chinese culture. Drawing on Ward et al.'s (2001) ^[24] framework for measuring intercultural attitudes, this level examines shifts in cultural curiosity, positive affect, and willingness to engage with Chinese cultural content. Micro-narratives may be particularly effective at the affective level because their personal and emotionally authentic character bypasses the defensive filters that audiences may apply to institutional or political messaging. The affective resonance of a fellow citizen's genuine cultural experience carries a persuasive force that official cultural diplomacy often lacks.

The third level, behavioral impact, examines whether exposure to cultural micro-narratives motivates audience members to take action—such as seeking additional information about China, expressing interest in visiting or studying in China, engaging with Chinese cultural content, or sharing narratives with their own social networks. This behavioral dimension is critical for assessing the practical communication efficacy of micro-narratives beyond mere awareness or attitude change. It also connects to the broader question of whether decentralized, grassroots cultural communication can complement or supplement institutional cultural diplomacy efforts (cf. Sun, 2025 ^[2]; Zhang, 2024 ^[3]).

4. Proposed Research Design

4.1 Research Questions

Guided by the theoretical framework developed above, the following research questions will guide empirical investigation:

RQ1: How do international students in China generate and share cultural micro-narratives through digital media platforms?

RQ2: What are the dominant content themes, narrative strategies, and framing patterns in international students' cultural micro-narratives?

RQ3: What factors influence the cross-cultural communication efficacy of these micro-narratives among audiences in students' home countries?

4.2 Methodology

This study proposes a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design ^[30], combining quantitative content analysis and survey methods with qualitative semi-structured interviews. This design enables both broad pattern identification and in-depth understanding of the mechanisms underlying micro-narrative generation and dissemination.

Phase 1: Social Media Content Analysis. A systematic analysis of cultural content posted by international students on major social media platforms (including TikTok/Douyin, YouTube, Instagram, WeChat Moments, and Facebook) will be conducted. The sample will comprise posts by international

students currently enrolled at Nanjing University of Science and Technology and partner institutions. A coding scheme will be developed based on the theoretical framework, capturing narrative type (experiential, informational, reflective, comparative), cultural theme (food, festivals, daily life, historical sites, social interactions, language), narrative format (video, image, text, multimedia), engagement metrics, and audience responses.

Phase 2: Survey. A structured questionnaire will be administered to a stratified sample of international students across multiple Chinese universities. The survey will measure four constructs: (a) embodied cultural experience (frequency and depth of participation in cultural activities), (b) micro-narrative production behavior (frequency, content preferences, and platform choices for cultural content sharing), (c) digital media literacy and usage patterns, and (d) intercultural sensitivity, adapted from Chen and Starosta's (2000) ^[31] Intercultural Sensitivity Scale. The questionnaire will be available in English, Chinese, and additional languages based on the composition of the student population.

Phase 3: Semi-Structured Interviews. In-depth interviews will be conducted with a purposive subsample of international students selected to represent diverse nationalities, disciplines, and levels of social media engagement. The interview protocol will explore students' motivations for sharing cultural content, their decision-making processes regarding what to share and how to frame it, their perceptions of audience reactions, and their reflections on their role as cultural mediators. Interviews will be conducted in the participant's preferred language and analyzed using thematic analysis ^[32].

4.3 Analytical Strategy

Quantitative data from the content analysis and survey will be analyzed using structural equation modeling to test the hypothesized relationships between embodied experience, narrative production, platform amplification, and communication efficacy. Qualitative data from interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis, with coding categories informed by the theoretical framework. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings will follow a convergence model, where both datasets are analyzed independently and then compared to identify convergent, complementary, or contradictory findings.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The framework proposed in this paper makes three theoretical contributions to the study of Chinese cultural communication and international education. First, it addresses the persistent gap between macro-level strategic frameworks and micro-level communicative practice by introducing the concept of the international student as "micro-narrator." This conceptual innovation extends existing theories of cultural communication proposed by Sun (2025) ^[2] and Yao (2026) ^[4] by incorporating individual communicative agency as a central analytical category. Rather than treating cultural communication as a unidirectional process from institutional producers to passive audiences, the framework reconceptualizes it as a distributed, multi-directional network in which individual actors play a constitutive role.

Second, the framework extends the micro-narrative frameworks developed by Zhang, Lv, and Si (2025) ^[5] and Georgakopoulou (2006) ^[22] from their current application in institutional and media contexts to the domain of personal cross-cultural experience. The three-element generation mechanism model—embodied experience, cognitive-affective processing, and digital mediation—provides a more fine-grained account of how cultural narratives are produced than existing theories, which have tended to focus on either the content of narratives or the platforms through which they are distributed, rather than the generative process itself.

Third, the framework synthesizes Chinese cultural communication theory with Bruner's (1991) ^[21] and Georgakopoulou's (2006) ^[22] theories of narrative, Kim's (2001) ^[25], Ward, Bochner, and Furnham's (2001) ^[24], and Berry's (1997) ^[26] frameworks for intercultural adaptation, and Jenkins's (2006) ^[23] theory of participatory culture in a way that preserves the distinctive contributions of each tradition while creating an integrated analytical apparatus. This theoretical synthesis responds to Li and Yin's (2024) ^[9] call for "symbiotic" approaches to cultural communication that transcend unidirectional models of cultural transmission.

5.2 Practical Implications

The framework has significant implications for international education policy and practice. First, it suggests that universities should recognize and support international students' role as cultural micro-narrators by providing structured cultural experience programs that generate rich narrative content. This goes beyond traditional cultural orientation programs to include immersive cultural experiences—such as community engagement, cultural workshops, and field trips—that are specifically designed to be "narrative-generative."

Second, the framework implies that international education offices should offer digital media literacy training that helps students develop effective narrative strategies. This training would draw on the micro-narrative construction principles identified by Zhang et al. (2025) ^[5] and the schema conversion strategies discussed by Zhou (2025) ^[7], equipping students with the skills to create cultural content that is both personally authentic and cross-culturally accessible.

Third, the framework provides a theoretical basis for evaluating the cultural communication impact of international education programs beyond conventional metrics such as enrollment numbers and academic outcomes. The three-level efficacy model (cognitive, affective, behavioral) offers a more comprehensive assessment framework that captures the broader societal impact of international education on cross-cultural understanding.

Fourth, for policymakers engaged in cultural communication strategy, the framework suggests that grassroots, individual-level communication channels should be integrated with institutional cultural diplomacy efforts. As Zhang (2025) ^[18] noted in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, the interaction between cultural communication and economic cooperation creates synergies that neither domain can achieve alone. International student micro-narratives represent a vast, largely untapped resource for cultural communication that operates with an authenticity and credibility that institutional channels often struggle to achieve.

5.3 Pedagogical Implications for Chinese Language and Culture Education

The framework also carries implications for the design of Chinese language and culture courses for international students. Zhu (2023) ^[20] noted the integration of cultural transmission within Chinese language education, and the present framework suggests that this integration can be deepened by explicitly incorporating micro-narrative production as a pedagogical activity. Students could be encouraged to create short-form cultural content as part of their coursework, thereby combining language learning, cultural understanding, and digital communication skills. This approach aligns with the experiential learning paradigm ^[33] in which concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation form an integrated learning cycle.

Furthermore, the concept of "cultural anchoring objects" ^[17] can be operationalized in curriculum design by identifying specific cultural artifacts, practices, and experiences that are particularly effective as narrative catalysts. A well-designed cultural curriculum would sequence these anchoring objects to provide a progressive deepening of cultural understanding, from surface-level encounters with food and festivals to deeper engagement with values, social norms, and philosophical traditions.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the theoretical framework has not yet been empirically validated. The proposed research design provides a methodological roadmap, but the actual testing of the model's hypotheses remains to be conducted. Future research should prioritize empirical validation using the mixed-methods approach outlined in Section 4, with particular attention to the measurement of cross-cultural communication efficacy.

Second, the framework is developed primarily in the context of international students at Chinese universities, and its generalizability to other populations (such as international scholars, business expatriates, or tourists) requires further investigation. The specific characteristics of the student population—including their extended duration of stay, institutional support structures, and academic engagement with Chinese culture—may produce distinctive patterns of micro-narrative generation that do not generalize to other sojourner groups.

Third, the rapid evolution of digital media platforms creates a moving target for theoretical analysis.

The platform affordances and algorithmic dynamics discussed in this paper reflect the current media landscape, but future developments in artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and immersive media may fundamentally alter the conditions of micro-narrative production and dissemination. Deng and Zhao's (2025) ^[12] discussion of intelligent media technology points toward emerging possibilities that warrant continued scholarly attention.

Fourth, this paper has not addressed the ethical dimensions of international student cultural communication, including issues of representation, cultural stereotyping, and the potential for micro-narratives to reinforce rather than challenge cultural prejudices. Future research should incorporate a critical perspective on the power dynamics and ethical implications of grassroots cultural communication.

Future research directions include: (a) comparative studies across different host countries and cultural contexts to test the generalizability of the framework; (b) longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of international students' micro-narratives over their entire sojourn period; (c) audience reception studies examining how micro-narratives are interpreted by diverse audiences in students' home countries; (d) network analysis of micro-narrative dissemination patterns to map the actual reach and influence of student-generated cultural content; and (e) experimental studies comparing the cross-cultural communication efficacy of micro-narratives versus institutional cultural communication materials.

7. Conclusion

This paper has proposed a theoretical framework for understanding international students in China as micro-narrators of Chinese culture—individuals who, through their embodied experiences and digital media practices, actively generate and disseminate cultural narratives that contribute to cross-cultural understanding. The framework integrates Chinese cultural communication theory, micro-narrative theory, intercultural adaptation theory, and participatory culture theory into a three-component model encompassing narrative generation mechanisms, dissemination pathways, and efficacy assessment.

The central contribution of this framework is its reconceptualization of the international student from a passive recipient of cultural diplomacy to an active agent of cultural communication. In an era of increasingly decentralized and participatory media environments, the communicative agency of individuals cannot be adequately captured by macro-level strategic frameworks alone. By centering the micro-narrative practices of international students, this framework offers a theoretical lens that is responsive to the complexity, diversity, and dynamism of contemporary cross-cultural communication.

As China continues to expand its role in global education and cultural exchange, the hundreds of thousands of international students who study in Chinese universities represent not merely beneficiaries of educational internationalization but active participants in the construction and communication of Chinese cultural meaning. Their micro-narratives—though individually modest—collectively constitute a powerful, authentic, and increasingly influential mode of cross-cultural communication that deserves both scholarly attention and institutional support. The theoretical framework and research design proposed in this paper provide a foundation for systematic empirical investigation of this phenomenon, with the ultimate aim of informing more effective and humane approaches to international cultural communication in the digital age.

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