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Interculturality as Negotiation: Power, Identity, and Agency in China-West Cultural Encounters

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of globalisation, transnational education, the mobility of people and the rapid development of digital media, the concept of cultural exchange between China and the West has shifted from a binary opposition of 'Chinese culture versus Western culture' to an exploration of 'how cultural meaning is produced and negotiated through interaction', and from 'cultural transmission' to 'cultural co-construction'. However, traditional research has largely focused on the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, whilst there remains a lack of discussion on how cultural meaning is negotiated within asymmetrical relationships. This paper adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in constructivist and interpretivist approaches. The research methods employed include semi-structured interviews, analysis of publicly available digital media content, examination of texts from transnational educational institutions, and a review of relevant academic literature. The ultimate aim is to explain how individuals understand, negotiate, resist and reconstruct cultural meaning within unequal power relations, and how this process influences their sense of identity and agency. This paper advocates shifting the focus of research on Sino-Western cultural exchange from 'cultural differences' to the negotiation of cultural meanings, the dynamic construction of identity, and the interplay between agency and power, thereby providing a more dynamic and critical analytical framework for understanding the new forms of Sino-Western cultural relations in the era of globalisation.



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Introduction

Global cultural exchange is not a one-way transmission of Chinese culture to Western culture, nor does it result in the ultimate assimilation of one culture into the other. In a globalised world, cross-cultural contact has increased significantly due to new communications and information technologies, as well as improvements in transport systems, and cross-cultural communication has become a major challenge. When a foreign culture enters a new society, it is reinterpreted and selectively adopted by the local population, and is reshaped in accordance with local customs, cultural backgrounds, ideologies and social structures, thereby taking on a new, localised form.

Images relating to lifestyle, popular culture and self-expression are not isolated from one another; on the contrary, they contribute to the formation of a global culture through their international dissemination via the media and the highly creative ways in which they are appropriated. In short, cultural exchange is a process of negotiation, rather than a one-way transmission of culture.

Nevertheless, it is a widespread attitude that people from all cultural backgrounds may reinforce the boundaries between the 'self' and the 'other' when interacting with those from different cultural backgrounds—viewing other cultures as a threat to their own sense of identity, and thus feeling the need to defend it. However, transnationalism is by no means the antithesis of nationalism. On the contrary, the fluidity, flexibility and adaptability inherent in transnationalism may actually reinforce migrants' sense of national identity and their tendency towards political intolerance. It is for this reason that intercultural communication is of paramount importance, its primary task being to ensure that cultural differences do not become barriers to mutual understanding.

Transnational education is, in itself, a space for cultural exchange. Traditionally, student mobility has been viewed as a one-way flow from the student's home country to the host country. However, in the globalised higher education market, students are regarded not only as learners, but also as consumers and potential human capital.

Appadurai introduced the concept of 'scapes' as a framework for understanding contemporary cultural flows arising from the global convergence of populations, media, technology, finance and ideologies (Woo & 2024).

Ethnoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes, and financescapes are all included in his five landscapes of global flow. They make reference to the distribution and dissemination of information, the concatenation of ideas, conceptions, and ideologies, the topography of human mobility, the global reconfiguration of technology, and the allocation of capital (During, 1999). The "complex, overlapping, and disjunctive order" of global flows is anticipated to be captured by constructs (Appadurai, 1990). Disjunctures are the "chaotic nature" of these flows between scapes, and the presence of both scapes and disjunctures creates the circumstances for global flows (Appadurai, 1999).

In existing academic literature, the differences between Chinese and Western cultures have now become a widely discussed topic; for at least the past forty years, the volume of research on cross-cultural topics—particularly cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural competence—has remained stable and has even shown a growing trend (Asante et al., 2007). However, the active negotiation of cultural meanings and identities amid unequal power relations has received little attention.

The significance of this paper lies in redefining 'interculturality'—shifting the

focus from cultural differences arising from 'belonging to two cultures' to a process of reimagining cultural identity and continuously negotiating meaning. A further significance lies in uncovering the power relations hidden behind 'cultural differences'. Furthermore, it offers a reinterpretation of 'identity', positing that cultural exchange is not a simple fusion of two cultures, but rather a process in which identity is continually constructed, expressed, adjusted and negotiated. Moreover, 'agency' is negotiated within the relationship between identity and social networks. Against the backdrop of globalisation and digital media, the 'space for cultural exchange' has expanded from the physical to the digital realm. This shifts the focus from overcoming the dichotomy between Chinese and Western cultures to the coordinated significance of different actors within transnational relationships.

Written in an accessible style, this study is sure to attract the attention of scholars in the fields of sociology, media studies, cultural and communication studies, as well as anyone with an interest in globalisation.

Literature Review

The most traditional approach in the study of Sino-Western cultural exchange has been to regard China and the West as cultural systems with distinct value systems, norms of communication and educational cultures; in recent years, however, an increasing number of studies have begun to question this practice of treating 'Chinese culture' and 'Western culture' as two stable, homogeneous cultural entities.

Hofstede argues that the 'mental programmes' people develop as they grow up are reinforced by the family, school and organisations, and that these programmes incorporate elements of national culture; these cultural differences are most clearly reflected in the dominant values of different countries (Hofstede, 2001). Put simply, different societies have different shared value

orientations, and these value orientations influence people's thinking and behaviour, as well as social institutions and organisational practices. Hofstede himself was in fact already aware that 'one cannot simply equate a country with a culture', which has left room for subsequent critical research. Inconsistencies in the traditional country categories are revealed by mixed and frequently contradicting data (Kittler, 2011). Edward T. Hall's concept of context, as a foundational framework for cross-cultural studies, relies on effective and reliable national classifications. Chinese students are thought to find it difficult to adapt to Western educational settings due to the dissonance between Eastern and Western learning methodologies. The author then goes on to criticise the view that Chinese learners are uncritically perceived as rote learners. The author's research found that Chinese students learn with the intention of understanding. The study ultimately concluded that, although Eastern and Western teaching styles differ significantly, students' underlying learning approaches can be similar in both China and the West (Mathias et al., 2013). For international students, studying in a foreign country can be challenging, and they often face a range of difficulties in adjusting to their new surroundings (Perez-Encinas and Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2018; Straker, 2016; Ward and Kennedy, 1993). Western students face numerous academic challenges at Chinese universities. Their experiences encompass both cross-cultural education and reverse mobility. The challenges they face stem not only from differences in teaching methods and culture between China and the West, but also from their lack of understanding regarding the quality of higher education in China (Liu et al., 2022). 'Comprehension and expression' and 'building a common foundation' are the main challenges facing Chinese students (Yang et al., 2025). Although the "Chinese circle" gives this group a safe haven, it also acts as a barrier to

intercultural dialogue and the formation of more multicultural identities (Zheng & Baker, 2022). Another aspect of the cross-cultural transition experienced by Chinese international students relates to differences in the learning environment in terms of contextualisation. Higher education in the UK typically employs a low-context approach to learning, with direct and explicit communication, whereas learning in China tends to favour a high-context, relationship-oriented approach (Zhou, 2026). Students' cross-cultural attitudes fundamentally shape their adaptation pathways, and the duration of their cultural immersion influences their cross-cultural performance as well as their reflections on the cultures of both their home country and their host country (Ye, 2025). Shah points out According to Shah, there is a hierarchical distinction between a Western (presumed critical) positioning in relation to knowledge, and an Eastern (presumed uncritical) one, and Chinese students in these schools are viewed from a deficiency viewpoint. "In this story, both Eastern and Western are monolithic fictions (Shan, 2025). An analysis of the above literature reveals a clear academic evolution, demonstrating how Chinese and Western cultures are portrayed differently from Hofstede to Hall, according to Mathias et al., Liu et al., Yang et al. and Zhou, how do individuals cope with cultural differences? The research by Xu, Zheng & Baker, Ye and Shah gradually shifts focus to the questions: How are cultural differences represented and experienced? Who defines cultural difference? Why is one cultural practice sometimes considered normal whilst another is considered deficient?

Research Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine, from a critical perspective, the power relations, identity and the construction of agency in Sino-Western cross-cultural exchange within the context of globalisation. Unlike the traditional approach, which treats Chinese and Western cultures as

opposites—that is, as two distinct entities with relatively stable cultural characteristics, such as differing value systems, communication norms and educational cultures—cross-cultural studies are viewed as a process of ongoing social interaction and negotiation of meaning. This paper interprets the cross-cultural nature of Chinese and Western cultures as an ongoing process of social interaction and meaning negotiation. It is grounded in constructivist and interpretivist methodological approaches. The paper argues that culture is not an entity that can be simply measured and categorised in a fixed manner, but rather a system of meaning that is constantly generated and transformed through concrete social interactions. This paper regards cultural differences as a social construction and an interactive process, rather than as entirely pre-existing objective facts. Combining theories of cultural difference with Bhabha's 'Third Space' cultural theoretical framework, this paper defines 'Sino-Western cultural exchange' as the ongoing cultural interaction occurring between members of Chinese and Western societies. It further introduces three analytical dimensions: power, identity and agency. Empirical data primarily consist of semi-structured interviews, publicly available digital media content, texts from transnational educational institutions, and relevant academic literature. Ultimately, this paper aims to explain how individuals understand, negotiate, resist and reconstruct cultural meanings within unequal power relations, and how this process influences their sense of identity and agency.

Interculturality as Negotiation

Adela Parra-Romero argues that interculturality helps to construct a model of interaction that incorporates conflict, viewing it as an expression of ontological differences, and enhances the transformative nature of interaction by acknowledging asymmetries, establishing points of convergence, and rethinking modes of

interaction. Interculturality is a product of conflict arising within interaction; it is an expression of ontological differences, the capacity to transform different forms, and serves as both a pivotal point and a means of recovery within interaction. She also proposes the concept of a space for intercultural interaction, viewing it as a space for thinking about issues from an ontological perspective—a space for listening rather than speaking. This production of knowledge is based on an awareness of ontological differences (which may be irreconcilable) and is grounded in local connections. In this regard, the models, tools and concepts of Science and Technology Studies (STS) can serve as a starting point for such a space for intercultural interaction (Adela Parra-Romero, 2022). Cross-culturalism is not a pre-existing state. Vivien et al. propose that the initiation or termination of cross-cultural dialogue is closely linked to the extent to which the interlocutors ‘delve’ into the unstable ‘third space’. They further suggest that intercultural dialogue (and intercultural communication) should be reconceptualised as a political and ethical response to the ‘thirdness’ of the ‘intermediate space’ within communication; this response should be disentangled from normative discourses that emphasise ‘self’ expression, ‘cultural diversity’ and teleologically achievable ‘intercultural competence’ (Vivien, et al., 2018). ‘Cross-cultural issues are as complex, unpredictable and difficult to control as human nature and society itself’ (Dervin, 2023a). Interculturality also focuses on its multifaceted relationships with intersubjectivity and the socio-political and economic context; this leads to identity being (partly) negotiated through language and being closely linked to it (Dervin, 2023a, 2025; Lavanchy et al., 2011). Holmes & Dervin argue that it is crucial to emphasise that identity and language are integral components of cross-cultural communication; consequently, these two concepts may (at times) be used

interchangeably. However, it remains vital to understand the roles of language and identity through different cross-cultural research methods (Mendoza et al., 2025). In her article ‘Negotiation as the Way of Engagement in Intercultural and Lingua Franca Communication: Frames of Reference and Interculturality’, Zhu Hua argues that ‘negotiation’ is the most important form of engagement in intercultural and lingua franca communication. She emphasises that communication is characterised by its ‘here and now’ nature, rather than being a hypothetical or predictive act; she focuses on the resources brought by both parties, rather than on the problems; and she emphasises the process rather than the outcome (Zhu, 2015). Bhabha argues that culture is not simply something possessed by distinct groups. Cultural meaning is generated, translated and reconstructed within the ‘third space’ of cultural encounter (Bhabha, 1994), which provides the theoretical foundation for ‘Negotiation’. An additional interpretation of interculturality is that it entails continuous, reciprocal growth that takes place in the interaction or communication between the instructor and the student. Regardless of the teacher’s or students’ sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds, it is a matter of mutual transformation rather than transmission (Bretag, 2006). In other words, cross-culturalism is not a one-way transfer of culture, but rather a continuous, reciprocal process of mutual development.

Power

Dervin explicitly criticised the view that intercultural competence is a fixed individual ability, pointing out that intercultural communication is in fact: “contextually and relationally contingent process of negotiation and struggle.” (Mary Jane Collier, 2015) This argument provides strong support for the central thesis: Interculturality is a negotiated process rooted in unequal power relations rather than a neutral process of cultural

exchange. Over the past decade, power relations and transformation have become two central focuses of global education and research in intercultural communication, highlighting the centrality of 'inter-ness' and 'gender'—rather than 'culture'—in intercultural communication. In their article *Power Relations and Change in Intercultural Communication Education: Zhongyong as a Complementary Analytical Framework*, Tian & Dervin place particular emphasis on "the 'inter-' and '-ity' of interculturality rather than 'culture' in encounters". In other words, the focus of research should shift from 'culture' to 'inter-' and '-ity'—that is, how cultures interact, negotiate and change. Bretag applies Bhabha's theory of the Third Space to education and computer-mediated communication, arguing that the Third Space is not automatically an equal space; it is therefore not merely a place of cultural mixing, but may also serve as a space for the renegotiation of power relations. The Third Space simultaneously encompasses negotiation, resistance, hierarchy and agency. Bhabha maintains that cultural meaning is generated through cultural contact and is not unilaterally controlled by any single cultural group.

Identity

One way to think about identity is as the network of social groupings we identify with, participate in, and lean toward. In this approach, identity is an exterior concept that is constantly performed and evolving (Kramsch, 2009). The construction and negotiation of identity exhibit trends towards fluidity, hybridity and emergence, and are interwoven throughout interactions at various levels, from the local and national to the global (Baker, 2016). The author argues that identity in ELF cross-cultural communication is fluid, hybrid and emergent. Baker raises a very important caveat: We cannot assume that participants are entirely free to construct their own identities. In other words, not only can I actively define

'who I am', but others can also define 'who you are'. Therefore, identity negotiation is not entirely equal.

Three viewpoints on identity in connection to power relations are put out by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004: 21): imposed identities, which cannot be negotiated, assumed identities, which are accepted and cannot be negotiated, and negotiable identities, which both people and groups can fight. Given the variety in intercultural communication, it appears likely that the idea of negotiable identities will be most pertinent to ELF. Essentialist descriptions of the "other" in intercultural communication (e.g. Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) have resulted from the confusion of cultural identities with national characterisations of culture in much traditional intercultural communication research (e.g. French culture is like this so all French people are like this too).

Identity refers to the definition of 'who' a person is; it is culturally oriented and socially constructed. Individuals need to negotiate with others in social interactions in order to develop their desired identities. In cross-cultural contexts, identity negotiation refers to the process by which individuals from different cultural backgrounds define, affirm, modify, question or support their own and others' identities. Effective cross-cultural identity negotiation involves attitudinal, cognitive and behavioural factors; it contributes to the development of cross-cultural competence—whereby individuals develop common ground through convergence whilst demonstrating their distinctiveness through differences. The dialectical unity of convergence and divergence enables individuals from different cultural backgrounds to validate and enhance their desired identities, thereby establishing reciprocal relationships (Dai et al., 2025). In cross-cultural contexts, 'identity negotiation' refers to the process by which people from different cultural backgrounds define,

confirm, modify, challenge or support their identities.

Agency

An investigation into how Chinese students construct and negotiate their identities through cross-cultural conflict during their study abroad experiences, and the role played by learner agency in this process, found that participants reconstructed their identities by investing in linguistic resources and practices and demonstrating autonomy. Furthermore, the experience of studying abroad enables them to develop new approaches to language learning and usage, which to some extent alters their linguistic attitudes towards accents; by negotiating their identities through intercultural conflict, this in turn influences the reconstruction of their prior perceptions of native English speaker identity (Cai, 2022). In other words, agency is a mechanism through which intercultural identities are negotiated. Not all participants are able to exercise agency easily or on an equal footing; rather, this negotiation takes place at the intersection of identity and social networks (Li, 2025). In short, not everyone possesses agency to the same degree; agency is not a fixed ability that individuals are born with, but rather something that emerges within specific social relationships and power structures.

Conclusion

In summary, Interculturality as Negotiation: Power, Identity, and Agency in China-West Cultural Encounters does not focus on cultural differences between China and the West in the traditional sense, but rather on the reinterpretation, negotiation, selection and reconstruction of such differences. The traditional model of cultural exchange between China and the West, centred on states, institutions and unidirectional communication, is being replaced by a dynamic process of interaction involving individuals, educational institutions, transnational communities and digital

platforms. In this process, culture is no longer a pre-existing, fixed system subject to unidirectional transmission; rather, it is imbued with new meaning through ongoing social interaction.

The central argument of this paper is 'Interculturality as Negotiation': identity and language are intrinsic and crucial components of intercultural communication; negotiation does not occur on an equal footing, but is embedded within asymmetrical relationships shaped by language, educational systems, media discourse, social status, historical context and cultural power.

In this process, Power, Identity and Agency form three closely interrelated dimensions. Power refers to the standards of behaviour that determine what is right and wrong. Identity can be viewed as the network of social groups in which we participate, towards which we orient ourselves, and with which we identify. Identity is the definition of 'who' a person is; it is culturally oriented and socially constructed. Agency is a mechanism through which intercultural identities are negotiated. Agency is not a fixed capacity inherent to the individual, but rather emerges within specific social relationships and power structures.

The 'third space' offers an important theoretical perspective for understanding this dynamic process. The study and daily lives of Chinese students in Western countries, the lives of foreigners in China, interactions on social media, and the exchange and sharing of academic achievements between Chinese and foreign scholars on academic platforms can all be regarded as different forms of the 'third space'. Interculturality itself is constituted by cultural hybridity, identity reconstruction and the reconfiguration of power.

This paper argues that an understanding of Sino-Western cultural interaction cannot be confined to a purely binary framework. Sino-

Western cultural exchange has shifted from a focus on the differences between the two cultures to an examination of how cultural meaning is produced and negotiated through interaction; it has moved from ‘cultural

transmission’ to ‘cultural co-construction’; and it has shifted from a focus on mere cultural adaptation to an examination of the dynamic relationships between power, identity and agency.

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