

Professional Course Contexts and Chinese Cultural Identification among International Students in China: The Mediating Role of Understanding China

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Abstract

In China, international student education aims to build not only disciplinary competence but also a nuanced understanding of the host society. Yet research on cultural learning among international students has mostly concentrated on language courses, China studies, and extracurricular activities. Professional courses such as finance, management, engineering, and medicine have received far less attention. Building on situated learning theory and intercultural learning research, this study tests a mediation model in which professional course contexts are expected to influence Chinese cultural identification directly and indirectly through students' understanding of China. Survey data were collected from 320 international students enrolled in degree programs at three Chinese universities. The analysis shows a positive association between a professionally meaningful course context and Chinese cultural identification. This link is partially mediated by students' ability to interpret Chinese economic, social, and institutional practices in a contextualized and disciplinary way. These results indicate that professional courses can function as meaningful sites of cultural learning when disciplinary study is combined with a contextualized understanding of China. Implications for curriculum design and institutional policy are also considered.

Keywords

International students in China; professional course context; understanding China; Chinese cultural identification; situated learning.

1. Introduction

China now ranks among the major destinations for international higher education, drawing students from a wide range of cultural and academic backgrounds. As a result, scholars and policymakers have paid growing attention to the quality of education offered to these students. In China, educational quality is not judged only by academic performance or disciplinary knowledge. The national quality standards issued by the Ministry of Education in 2018 list professional competence, knowledge and understanding of China, language development, and intercultural competence as closely related and equally important goals (Ministry of Education, 2018) [1]. This means that “understanding China” is treated as a core educational outcome rather than an optional cultural add-on.

In practice, though, disciplinary education and cultural education are usually delivered in separate domains. International students often learn about Chinese language, history, society, and culture through language courses, overview classes about China, cultural lectures, campus events, and social practice programs. By contrast, their professional courses, finance, management, engineering, medicine, for example, tend to present theories, models, and case studies as universal disciplinary knowledge. This division may look reasonable on the surface, but it can break up students' learning experiences. They may study “about China” in one part of

the curriculum, yet their major courses rarely ask them to apply disciplinary knowledge to Chinese organizations, markets, institutions, or social practices (Hu & Dai, 2021) [2].

This separation is especially problematic because professional courses take up most of international students' formal learning time. A finance student, for example, spends far more hours on investment, risk, and corporate decision-making than on cultural activities. An engineering student devotes more time to analyzing systems, constraints, and optimization. If these courses stay disconnected from the Chinese setting, universities miss a stable and intellectually demanding opportunity to build an informed understanding of China.

Professional courses are never culturally neutral. The cases chosen, the way problems are framed, the assumptions built into models, and the kinds of evidence accepted in class discussions all influence how students read the society around them. Suppose a financial management course includes a case about valuing a time-honored Chinese brand or financing a public cultural project. In that case, the course is doing more than showing a technical formula. It lets students examine how economic value, cultural continuity, public interest, and social development interact in a specific setting. When designed carefully, such opportunities can turn professional learning into a meaningful pathway to understanding China.

This study holds that professional course contexts can make a substantial contribution to Chinese cultural identification among international students. But the effect is not automatic. It depends on whether course design lets students use disciplinary concepts to interpret China, compare across contexts, examine credible evidence, and revise their first judgments. Put differently, cultural identification is more likely to develop when students first gain a contextualized understanding of Chinese practices. That understanding must also be intellectually defensible. To test this idea, we built a parsimonious mediation model. It includes three core variables. Professional course context serves as the independent variable. Chinese cultural identification is the outcome. Understanding China acts as the mediator. We asked three research questions. First, does a professionally meaningful Chinese course context relate positively to cultural identification? Second, does that context promote students' understanding of China? Third, does understanding China mediate the link between course context and cultural identification?

This study offers three main contributions. First, it extends cultural learning research beyond language courses and extracurricular activities. Professional courses become legitimate sites of cultural meaning-making. Second, it clarifies an important distinction. That distinction is between mere exposure and genuine understanding of China. Third, it provides a theoretical basis for later pedagogical innovation. This includes culturally contextualized curricula and AI-assisted multimodal teaching tools.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. International Students' Cultural Learning in China

International students experience much more than academic adjustment. They face unfamiliar communication norms and institutional expectations. They also meet new social relationships, values, and daily routines. Acculturation research views international education as a negotiation. Students negotiate between earlier cultural frames and the host environment (Berry, 1997; Smith & Khawaja, 2011) [3,4]. This process does not require abandoning one's heritage identity. Berry's (1997) framework separates integration from assimilation. People can engage positively with a host culture. They can also keep strong ties to their original culture. This distinction matters for understanding Chinese cultural identification. Cultural identification should not be read as a demand to replace existing identities. It also should not mean accepting normative claims without question. Rather, it is an informed and open orientation toward Chinese culture. It is also non-exclusive. It includes understanding, respect,

and positive evaluation. Willingness to communicate is part of it too. Such identification can coexist with a strong heritage-cultural identification. An educational approach that respects students' original cultures matters. It is more likely to encourage constructive engagement. A one-way view of cultural learning is less effective (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006) [5,6].

Earlier studies point to several key influences on adaptation. These include language proficiency and social interaction. Institutional support and intercultural contact also matter (Ranabahu & De Silva, 2024) [7]. Research also shows that identity can be reshaped. Educational exchange and cultural memory contribute. New interpretive experiences play a role too (Hu & Dai, 2021) [2]. Cultural identification is thus dynamic and context-dependent. Chinese scholarship has increasingly stressed "country education." It also emphasizes cultural understanding and international communication capacity. Previous work describes a multidimensional approach. It links language and culture. It also links teaching and management. Campus and society are connected. Chinese and international students are connected too. This line of research shows the value of cultural experiences. Regional resources and peer interaction also matter. But it reflects a wider tendency. Cultural education is mostly tied to language programs. China overview courses and cultural events are also common. Social practice is another focus. Disciplinary learning is rarely the main site.

These approaches have produced useful institutional practices. Museum visits and heritage projects are common. Community activities and enterprise visits also help. They expose students to vivid forms of Chinese life. But educational value depends on interpretation. Exposure alone does not guarantee understanding. Students may remember an event. Yet they may not connect it to historical development. They may miss economic transformation or contemporary social values. This interpretive problem has drawn recent attention. Scholars of multimodal and AI-supported learning have noticed it (Jin & Ma, 2025) [8]. These technologies hold promise. But the present study steps back. It aims to identify the core mechanism they should support. That mechanism is contextual understanding.

2.2. Professional Course Contexts as Sites of Cultural Meaning-Making

A professional course context is more than a classroom. It is also more than the language of instruction. It refers to a patterned educational environment. Curriculum content and examples form part of it. Tasks, interaction, and assessment also matter. In this study, a high-quality course context has four features. These features are connected.

The first feature is the integration of China-based cases. These cases may involve Chinese firms or industries. They may also include public institutions and cultural organizations. Social projects can be used too. The goal is not to replace international knowledge. Local content should not crowd it out. Instead, students should see how disciplinary principles work in China. The second feature is the link between concepts and realities. Disciplinary concepts should connect to Chinese conditions. A case becomes meaningful when students use professional knowledge. They must analyze it actively. In finance, students may examine a traditional brand's intangible value. They could also study a cultural-tourism project's risk profile. In engineering, technical design may respond to population density. Environmental conditions also matter. This structure offers a powerful lens. It helps students understand social reality. The third feature is intercultural comparison. International students naturally compare China with home. A well-designed course encourages careful comparison. Students should identify the conditions behind different practices. They should examine evidence. They should avoid treating any country as homogeneous. Structured comparison helps spot assumptions. It also reveals contextual variables. It is not a competition between cultures. The fourth feature is reflective and evidence-based expression. Students need chances to state initial interpretations. They should get feedback and examine sources. They should revise conclusions when needed. Reflection turns experience into learning. Evidence prevents empty rhetoric.

This conceptualization draws on situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) [9]. That theory sees learning as fundamentally social. Learning is situated in forms of participation. Knowledge becomes meaningful through practice. It is not simply transmitted. University courses differ from classic apprenticeship settings. But the basic principle still applies. Students learn disciplinary knowledge by using it. They solve meaningful problems. Constructive alignment is also relevant (Biggs, 1996) [10]. Suppose a university wants international students to understand China. Yet professional courses do not require contextual interpretation. Then that outcome stays marginal. By contrast, course objectives can include contextual application. Classroom tasks can demand analysis of Chinese cases. Assessments can evaluate evidence-based interpretation. Then understanding China becomes part of the curriculum.

2.3. Understanding China as an Educational Outcome

“Understanding China” can be interpreted at several levels. The most basic level includes factual knowledge. This covers history, institutions, geography, and culture. It is necessary but not sufficient. The second level involves contextual explanation. Students see how social practices develop. They grow from specific historical and institutional conditions. Economic and cultural factors also matter. The third level involves disciplinary transfer. Students use major concepts to interpret Chinese cases. This level is crucial. It separates professional learning from general exposure. A finance student does not show understanding by reciting facts. Instead, they use cash-flow analysis. They also use stakeholder theory. They apply these to a Chinese cultural project. The fourth level involves epistemic judgment. Students separate evidence from stereotype. They recognize source limits. They revise conclusions when new information appears.

Accordingly, we define understanding China as a capacity. It is the capacity to interpret Chinese practices. These practices include economic, social, and institutional ones. Cultural practices are also included. Students use contextual knowledge and disciplinary concepts. They also rely on evidence-based judgment. This definition aligns cultural learning with academic reasoning.

2.4. Chinese Cultural Identification

Cultural identification refers to a psychological relationship. Individuals understand and evaluate a culture through it. They also position themselves in relation to that culture. It can include cognitive recognition and affective respect. Perceived connection and behavioral willingness also matter. We use “Chinese cultural identification,” not “national identity.” Participants are international students. They are not asked to adopt a political identity.

We define Chinese cultural identification as a positive orientation. It is informed and non-exclusive. It includes respect for Chinese cultural development. Students should positively evaluate selected values and practices. They should be willing to learn and communicate. They should feel comfortable appreciating Chinese culture. They can still keep their original identity. This definition does not demand total agreement. Students may appreciate some aspects. They may discuss others critically. The key shift is from distance to informed engagement. It is also from stereotype to engagement.

2.5. Research Gaps and Hypotheses

The existing literature shows three major gaps. First, professional courses remain underexplored. They are rarely studied as cultural learning sites. Previous research emphasizes language proficiency. Intercultural contact and social support are also common predictors. Extracurricular cultural experiences matter too (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Hu & Dai, 2021) [2,4]. These studies show learning through host environment interaction. But they say little about disciplinary classrooms. Second, previous studies often mix outcomes. Cultural knowledge and adaptation are treated together. Attitudes and identification are also grouped. Yet connecting mechanisms are not specified. Third, many reform studies offer useful recommendations. But

they do not test a concise explanatory model. To fill these gaps, this study examines how course context shapes identification. It also tests whether understanding China works as a mediator. Professional course contexts may shape cultural identification. They make Chinese content more relevant to students' development. Constructive alignment theory supports this. Intended outcomes are more likely when content, activities, and assessment align (Biggs, 1996) [10]. Understanding China can be embedded in disciplinary cases. It can appear in classroom discussions and assessed assignments. Then it becomes part of formal academic experience. It is not an optional cultural supplement. Sustained engagement with China-based issues helps. It creates repeated chances for intercultural contact. Intergroup contact research suggests structured contact reduces prejudice. It promotes positive attitudes toward different groups (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) [11,12]. In professional classrooms, this contact may involve evidence-based discussion. Intercultural comparison and collaborative case analysis also help. These processes strengthen cultural learning. They make it more credible and relevant. This leads to a more positive orientation. Therefore, we propose:

H1. Professional course context is positively associated with Chinese cultural identification among international students in China.

Situated learning theory explains how courses may improve understanding of China. Learning is not just acquiring decontextualized information. Knowledge becomes meaningful through participation. That participation happens in socially and culturally situated practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) [9,13]. Professional courses can include Chinese organizations. They can include industries and institutions. Social issues also matter. Then students can apply disciplinary concepts to their study setting. They may use finance or management theories. Engineering or public administration theories also work. These help interpret unfamiliar practices.

This process helps students move past fragmented facts. It leads toward contextualized understanding. It encourages students to examine conditions. Historical and institutional conditions matter. Economic and cultural factors also shape outcomes. Transformative learning theory adds more. Learners may revise their frames of reference. They do this by examining prior assumptions. They also meet alternative interpretations. Evidence supports these alternatives (Mezirow, 1991) [14]. Courses that encourage reflection and comparison help. Evidence-based analysis also helps. These courses may reduce stereotypes. They promote more differentiated views of China. Thus, we propose:

H2. Professional course context is positively associated with international students' understanding of China.

Understanding China may also explain how courses shape identification. Acculturation theory says positive engagement does not require abandoning heritage identity. Host culture identification can coexist with original identity (Berry, 1997) [3]. Intercultural competence also matters. It involves interpreting practices from multiple perspectives. Students should evaluate them critically. They should interact with difference respectfully (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006) [5,6]. Cultural identification is more likely through understanding. Reflective engagement helps more than simple exposure.

Contextual knowledge makes unfamiliar Chinese practices easier to understand. This includes economic and social practices. Institutional and cultural practices also count. This understanding reduces psychological distance. It weakens stereotype-based interpretations. Fairer evaluations become possible. Research on international students supports this. New educational and interpretive experiences can reshape identity. They also affect host society relationships (Hu & Dai, 2021) [2]. When students use intellectual tools from their majors, cultural learning ties to their identities. It becomes part of their academic and professional selves. Course context may therefore foster identification partly through better understanding.

That understanding is contextualized, disciplinary, and evidence-based. Accordingly, we propose:

H3. Understanding China mediates the positive relationship between professional course context and Chinese cultural identification.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and Procedure

The study targeted international students who were enrolled in degree programs at universities in Beijing, China. To take part, students had to have finished at least one professional course offered by a Chinese university. Professional courses included areas such as business, economics, engineering, medicine, tourism, public administration, and other major fields. Only completing Chinese-language courses or general cultural activities did not meet the study's purpose.

We collected data from three universities in Beijing using convenience and snowball sampling. We contacted international student affairs offices and program coordinators to help share the survey link. Participation was anonymous, and students were told that their answers would not influence their grades, scholarships, or visa status. This was intended to reduce social desirability bias. The survey was administered online through a secure platform in the middle of the 2025-2026 academic year. In total, 358 students responded, and 320 questionnaires were complete and valid, giving a valid response rate of 89.4%. Of the 320 participants, 55% were male and 45% female. Ages ranged from 18 to 42 years, with a mean of 24.5 and a standard deviation of 3.8. By degree level, 40% were undergraduates, 45% were master's students, and 15% were doctoral students. Participants came from Asia (45%), Africa (25%), Europe (15%), the Americas (10%), and the Middle East (5%). Their length of residence in China ranged from 6 months to 6 years, with a mean of 2.3 years and a standard deviation of 1.6. As for major fields, 30% studied business and economics, 25% engineering and technology, 20% humanities and social sciences, 15% medicine and health sciences, and 10% tourism and public administration. Self-reported Chinese language proficiency averaged 2.8 on a 5-point scale where 1 meant beginner and 5 meant fluent.

3.2. Measures

All substantive items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was written in English, since English is often the common language of instruction in many international programs. For Professional Course Context (PCC). We use five-item scale assessed the degree to which major courses include China-based cases, connect disciplinary knowledge to Chinese realities, encourage intercultural comparison, and require evidence-based reflection. Example items included: "My professional courses frequently use cases from Chinese organizations, industries, or social practices" and "Course assignments require me to connect professional knowledge with the social or cultural context of China." Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.84.

For Understanding China (UC), we use five-item scale measured students' perceived ability to interpret Chinese practices in a contextual and professional way. Example items included: "I can explain why some Chinese economic or social practices have developed in their particular context" and "I can use concepts from my major to analyze cases in China." Cronbach's alpha was 0.86.

For Chinese Cultural Identification (CCI), we use five-item scale measured informed respect, positive evaluation, willingness to communicate, and compatibility with heritage identity. Example items included: "I respect the historical development and continuity of Chinese culture" and "I feel comfortable appreciating Chinese culture while maintaining my own cultural

identity." Cronbach's alpha was 0.89. For Control Variables, we also gathered demographic information, including gender, age, degree level, region of origin, length of residence in China, Chinese language proficiency, and major field. These variables were used in supplemental analyses to check whether the main findings held up.

3.3. Translation and Pilot Testing

The questionnaire was given in English, but we still ran cognitive interviews with ten international students from different language backgrounds to check item clarity. Participants were asked to explain each item and point out any wording that was ambiguous or culturally sensitive. Based on their feedback, we made minor revisions. Then we ran a pilot survey with 50 students to examine item distributions, corrected item-total correlations, and internal consistency. All items performed well, with no major ceiling or floor effects.

3.4. Analytical Strategy

Data analysis proceeded in five steps using SPSS 26.0 and PROCESS Model 4 for mediation analysis (Hayes, 2018) [15]. First, we screened the data for missing values, extremely short completion times, patterned responses, and univariate outliers. Missing data were minimal (less than 2%) and were handled using listwise deletion. Second, we checked internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. Third, we ran confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with AMOS 24.0 to test whether the hypothesized three-factor model fit the data better than alternative models. Fourth, we calculated descriptive statistics and correlations. Fifth, we tested the mediation hypothesis using a bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval with 5,000 resamples.

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations among the core variables. The mean score for professional course context (PCC) was 3.65 (SD = 0.54), for understanding China (UC) was 3.64 (SD = 0.52), and for Chinese cultural identification (CCI) was 3.65 (SD = 0.59). All variables were approximately normally distributed, and there was no severe multicollinearity (VIFs < 1.5).

The CFA results indicated a good fit for the three-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 2.12$, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.04). This model fit significantly better than a one-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 4.56$, CFI = 0.82, RMSEA = 0.11) and a two-factor model that combined PCC and UC ($\chi^2/df = 3.45$, CFI = 0.88, RMSEA = 0.09). All factor loadings were above 0.60 and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), which pointed to adequate convergent validity. Composite reliability values were 0.87 for PCC, 0.88 for UC, and 0.90 for CCI. For each construct, the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded its correlations with the other constructs, supporting discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) [16].

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Core Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Professional Course Context	3.65	0.54	(.84)		
2. Understanding China	3.64	0.52	.492**	(.86)	
3. Chinese Cultural Identification	3.65	0.59	.472**	.581**	(.89)

Note. n = 320. ** $p < .001$. Cronbach's alpha coefficients are presented in parentheses on the diagonal.

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

Table 2 presents the regression results, H1 predicted that professional course context would show a positive relationship with Chinese cultural identification. In the total-effect regression model (Model 1), PCC turned out to be a significant predictor of CCI ($B = 0.517$, $SE = 0.054$, $t = 9.54$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 22.3% of the variance. This finding offers strong support for H1. H2 predicted a positive link between professional course context and understanding China. Model 2 showed that PCC significantly predicted UC ($B = 0.477$, $SE = 0.047$, $t = 10.06$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 24.2% of the variance. H2 is therefore supported. H3 predicted that understanding China would mediate the relationship between PCC and CCI. When both variables were entered together into the outcome model (Model 3), UC still significantly predicted CCI ($B = 0.520$, $SE = 0.057$, $t = 9.10$, $p < 0.001$). PCC also stayed significant ($B = 0.269$, $SE = 0.055$, $t = 4.85$, $p < 0.001$), which points to partial mediation.

The bootstrapped indirect effect was 0.248, with a 95% confidence interval running from 0.183 to 0.317. Since the interval did not include zero, the indirect effect was statistically significant. The direct effect of PCC on CCI (0.269) was also significant. The proportion of the total effect that was mediated came to 48.0% ($0.248/0.517$). These results support H3 and indicate that understanding China partially explains how professional course contexts influence cultural identification.

Table 2. Regression and Mediation Results

Model / Effect	Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Model 1 (Outcome: CCI)	PCC	0.517	0.054	9.54	<.001	[0.411, 0.623]
Model 2 (Outcome: UC)	PCC	0.477	0.047	10.06	<.001	[0.384, 0.570]
Model 3 (Outcome: CCI)	PCC	0.269	0.055	4.85	<.001	[0.160, 0.378]
	UC	0.520	0.057	9.10	<.001	[0.407, 0.633]
Indirect Effect	PCC → UC → CCI	0.248	0.034			[0.183, 0.317]

Note. $n = 320$. PCC = Professional Course Context; UC = Understanding China; CCI = Chinese Cultural Identification. Bootstrapped confidence intervals based on 5,000 resamples.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpretation of Findings and Theoretical Contributions

The data support our mediation model. They clarify how professional course context relates to cultural identification. We found a positive association. China-related content tied to disciplinary knowledge matters. Students then form a more informed view of Chinese culture. International students come mainly for academic growth (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) [4]. Cultural learning can seem secondary if disconnected from their field. But students can use finance or engineering concepts. They can use management or medicine concepts. Then cultural learning becomes part of disciplinary competence.

This does not mean adding a few cases automatically helps. Course context quality is key. Our measure did not just capture added Chinese elements. It captured structured comparison and evidence-based analysis. It captured reflection and chances to revise views. These features protect intellectual autonomy. They separate real contextualization from superficial name-dropping. A purely instrumental course may have little value. It may even provoke resistance if it discourages questions (Mezirow, 1991) [14].

The link between course context and understanding China fits situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) [9]. Knowledge remains abstract until applied to real problems. Unfamiliar

Chinese practices become easier to grasp with proper concepts. The professional classroom acts as a bridge. It connects disciplinary language with concrete cases. Professional analysis cannot remove all bias. But it pushes students to find evidence. It pushes them to state assumptions clearly.

Mediation analysis adds insight. Understanding China explained about 48% of the total effect. Courses encourage identification partly by making practices intelligible. Identification grows more from understanding than exposure. Mediation was partial. So understanding China is not the only path. Classroom belonging and teacher support also matter. Peer interaction and positive experiences matter too. This fits the complexity of intercultural learning (Kim, 2001) [17]. Some students may develop positive attitudes through supportive dynamics. Others may gain knowledge without strong connection. The model does not claim automatic identification. It claims understanding creates better conditions.

The study contributes in several ways. First, it extends situated learning theory beyond communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) [13]. It now includes cultural interpretation. International students learn by applying their field's methods. They apply them to Chinese organizations. Second, the study separates course context from understanding China. Course context is the educational environment. Understanding China is a student-level outcome. This separation allows testing design effects. Third, we use a non-assimilative definition. Identification means informed respect and interest. It includes positive evaluation and communication willingness. It does not replace original identities. This fits integration-oriented acculturation theory (Berry, 1997) [3]. Host culture engagement can coexist with heritage identity.

Finally, the simple three-variable model offers focus. Previous research lists many predictors. These include language proficiency and social support. They also include cultural intelligence and stress. Complex models hide mechanisms tied to curriculum design. This model is easier to test and apply.

5.2. Implications for Curriculum and Institutional Practice

Professional courses can help students understand China. But contextualization must be embedded. It cannot be superficial. Adding Chinese names or locations is not enough. A good case pushes students to think. Disciplinary concepts should meet Chinese conditions. A finance case about a cultural institution could ask students to weigh public value. It could include intangible assets and funding limits. Stakeholder interests matter too, not just net present value. Classroom tasks should move from description to explanation. Students first identify what happened. Then they ask why. Which conditions mattered? Which concepts explain the result? How to judge different interpretations? This process turns exposure into understanding. Broad country comparisons are not productive. Better to compare around shared dimensions. These include institutional duties and financing mechanisms. They include stakeholder ties and risk. This reduces unsupported generalizations. Students see the conditions that shape differences. Evidence should stay central. Credible reports and policy documents help. Official statistics and academic studies help too. They separate contextual explanation from stereotype. Evidence-based tasks strengthen rigor. They prevent cultural education from becoming rhetoric. Assessment should match goals. If understanding China is a course goal, evaluate it. Students should apply concepts and explain context. They should compare views and use evidence. Case reports and reflective analyses work well. Policy briefs and presentations also work. Exams testing only formulas miss this point.

Classrooms need space for respectful disagreement. Identification built through pressure is not credible. It is also not stable. Students should question cases. They should point out limits. They can offer alternatives with evidence. This openness builds trust. It increases willingness to engage.

Responsibility should not rest only with language departments. Program directors can review the curriculum. They can find contextualization opportunities. Instructors may need help choosing cases. They may need bilingual materials. They may need help designing comparison tasks. Universities could build interdisciplinary case libraries. A museum or heritage district could be examined. Finance, management, and engineering angles work. Tourism, public administration, and communication also work. This coordination lets students use their own lenses. Learning becomes more coherent.

Faculty development is essential. Subject expertise alone is not enough. Instructors need discussion skills. They must recognize sensitive assumptions. They must avoid oversimplifying local contexts. They must respond well to disagreement. Teaching international students is a specialized pedagogy. It needs institutional support. Future research could study contextualization as an intervention. Understanding China could be a mediating outcome. Scenario-based learning and multilingual resources may help. AI-assisted materials may also improve quality.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Several limits affect interpretation. First, the design is cross-sectional. Causal conclusions are not possible. Students with positive attitudes may rate courses better. Reverse causation is possible. Longitudinal research could track changes. Quasi-experimental studies could compare course designs. Second, the study uses self-reports. Anonymity and neutral wording helped. But bias may remain. Future research could use performance measures. Graded case analyses and scenario tasks help. Written explanations with standard criteria also help. The scales showed good psychometrics. But more validation is needed. Measurement invariance should be tested. This includes language level and region. It also includes degree level and discipline.

The model leaves out some variables. Teacher behavior and peer interaction are missing. Chinese-language proficiency is missing. Prior knowledge and motivation matter too. Future work could treat them as moderators. Language skills may help case engagement. Prior experience may shape interpretation. Disciplinary differences need study. Course context may work differently in finance or medicine. It may differ in engineering or humanities. Broad surveys show patterns. Discipline-specific work identifies best forms. Finance courses may stress regulation. Medical courses may stress public health.

The sample came from three Beijing universities. This limits generalizability. Students in smaller cities may differ. Different regions may differ. Multi-region research would help. Future studies could go beyond surveys. Classroom observation and interviews would help. Analysis of assignments and interventions would add evidence.

7. Conclusion

Professional courses can be key sites for cultural learning. Students encounter China through many channels. Firms, institutions, and professional problems are important. Disciplinary concepts connected to Chinese realities support understanding. Structured comparison and evidence help. Reflection also helps. The results show positive associations. Course context relates to understanding and identification. Understanding China partially mediates the link. Students with contextual knowledge and concepts do better. They develop a rational and positive orientation.

These results matter for practice. Universities should integrate cultural and academic learning. Language courses cannot do all the work. Disciplinary curricula can carry this load. Students can use their field's frameworks. They can interpret the society where they study. The study

offers a clear framework. Course contextualization is a strategy. Understanding China is a mechanism. Cultural identification is an outcome. Future research can build on this. Longitudinal and experimental work is needed. Discipline-specific and classroom-based studies will help identify effective forms.

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