



The Significance and Pathways for International Students in Promoting the Ideals of Chinese-Style Modernization

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the strategic significance and implementation pathways for international students in the international communication of the ideals of Chinese-style Modernization. The research finds that international students, by virtue of their unique status as “the Other within,” possess an irreplaceable advantage in dispelling external stereotypes and presenting the concepts of China’s development through personalized micro-narratives and cross-cultural interpretation. However, their communication practices largely remain at a spontaneous, fragmented, and superficial level. The core issue lies in the structural disconnect between the students’ “depth of experience” and their “sophistication of interpretation.” Addressing this core contradiction, this study proposes that the construction of future pathways must achieve a strategic upgrade from simple “communication empowerment” to systematic “interpretation cultivation,” helping students complete a transformation of identity through profound reforms in the educational model. The study argues that the highest strategic value of international students is not in shaping them into propagandists for China’s official stance. Rather, it lies in cultivating them, through long-term and in-depth educational interaction, into a “transnational cognitive community” capable of profoundly understanding and rationally evaluating China’s development path. This would enable them to become a bulwark in their home societies against extremist narratives and a force for promoting rational dialogue, thus making a far-reaching contribution to the construction of a more peaceful and rational global conversational space.

Subject Areas

Journalism and Communication

Keywords

International Communication, Chinese-Style Modernization, International Students

1. Preamble

Amidst current global transformations, Chinese modernization offers a new frame of reference for the vast number of developing countries to transcend Western models. Meanwhile, as a key link connecting China and the world, international students in China possess lived experiences that constitute a unique micro-perspective for examining the effectiveness of international communication. Integrating grand modernization theory with individual micro-experiences not only helps to elucidate the global significance of Chinese modernization but also provides crucial empirical support for enhancing the effectiveness of international communication.

1.1. Chinese-Style Modernization

Chinese modernization is a dynamically evolving, endogenous creation rather than a simple imitation of Western models. By integrating the basic principles of Marxism with China's specific realities and its fine traditional culture, it effectively resolves such dilemmas inherent in Western modernization as the alienation of capital and hegemonic expansion. This paradigm strives to seek the optimal balance between efficiency and equity, as well as development and security, thereby demonstrating a new logic of civilization distinct from capitalist modernity.

1.1.1. Definition of Essence and Core Attributes

Chinese-style Modernization is a practical paradigm with clearly defined essential regulations. Its authoritative definition was articulated by General Secretary Xi Jinping in the report to the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, namely, "socialist modernization led by the Communist Party of China." It "contains elements that are common to the modernization processes of all countries, but it is more characterized by features that are unique to the Chinese context" [1]. This definition, from the perspectives of the leading entity and institutional nature, profoundly reveals its fundamental divergence from Western capitalist modernization. The leadership of the Communist Party of China is the core guiding force of Chinese-style Modernization, running through its entire process from initial exploration to the full maturation of its discourse system [2]. Its socialist institutional nature determines its steadfast adherence to a "people-centered" value orientation, with the core goals of achieving common prosperity and the all-round development of the individual, thereby forming a stark contrast with the inherent problems of polarization and human alienation in capitalist modernization [3].

1.1.2. Theoretical Origins and Ideological Integration

The theoretical genesis of Chinese-style Modernization is based on a multifaceted dialectical integration of Marxist modernization theory, Western modernization theories, and China's indigenous modernization discourse. Its foundation is deeply rooted in Marxism, especially the concept of "bypassing the Caudine Forks," which provides methodological guidance for exploring non-Western paths [2]. Concurrently, on the premise of subverting "Eurocentrism", it has critically absorbed and creatively transformed rationalist and scientific concepts originating from the Enlightenment. Ultimately, this theoretical framework has also integrated the historical evolution of indigenous modernization discourses, from the Self-Strengthening Movement to Deng Xiaoping's "Four Modernizations of the Chinese style," making it a systematic and complete theory [4].

1.1.3. The Five Core Practical Features

The five core practical features of Chinese-style Modernization are closely interconnected and form an organic whole. First is its immense population size. The comprehensive modernization of over 1.4 billion people is both a colossal challenge and a source of strategic advantages, fostering a super-sized domestic market and a "demographic dividend" of talent. In response, China is committed to mitigating population pressure through endogenous development strategies such as rural revitalization and invigorating the country through science and education [5]. Second, as an essential requirement of socialism, it pursues common prosperity for all people. Through a coordinated institutional design of primary, secondary, and tertiary distribution, it ensures and improves people's livelihoods during development to prevent the polarization of wealth. At the same time, to avoid the dilemma of "material abundance and spiritual poverty" found in Western modernization, Chinese-style Modernization upholds the coordination of material and spiritual civilization. It cultivates core socialist values and develops cultural undertakings to achieve the dual pursuit of being "materially affluent and spiritually enriched" [6]. In its development philosophy, it has abandoned the old path of "pollute first, clean up later," emphasizing harmony between humanity and nature. It has established "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" as a core concept and practices the idea of a "community of life for man and nature" through institutional designs like the "dual carbon" goals [7]. Finally, in international relations, it unswervingly follows the path of peaceful development, advocates for a global governance vision of "extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits," and through practices such as the co-construction of the "Belt and Road," it has broken the traditional Western narrative that "modernization inevitably leads to hegemony," offering the world a new model of modernization achievable without reliance on war, colonialism, or plunder [8].

1.1.4. The Trajectory of Historical Evolution

The exploration of Chinese-style Modernization has gone through three key periods. The period of socialist revolution and construction (1949-1978) was the foundational stage, which established the basic socialist system and an independent

industrial framework, and put forward the initial concept of the “Four Modernizations.” The new period of reform, opening up, and socialist modernization (1978-2012) was a stage of comprehensive expansion. Deng Xiaoping creatively proposed the concept of “Chinese-style modernization” and the “three-step” strategy, pushing the connotation of modernization from purely economic construction to the “five-in-one” comprehensive development. The new era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (2012-present) is a phase of deepening and sublimation in both theory and practice. “Chinese-style Modernization” has been systematically expounded as a mature theoretical and discourse system, endowed with the world-historical significance of creating a “new form of human civilization.”

1.1.5. Multidimensional Contemporary Value

1) Domestic Dimension

In the domestic dimension, its value is manifested on multiple levels. Chinese-style Modernization has greatly enriched and developed Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, systematically answering the core contemporary question of “what kind of powerful socialist modernized country to build and how to build it,” thereby expanding the breadth and depth of the theory of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics [1]. This theoretical innovation, by closely linking grand objectives with the immediate interests of the people, such as “common prosperity” and a “better life,” is effectively transformed into a powerful force for strengthening social consensus and stimulating public initiative, making modernization a common cause for all people [8]. The broad social consensus and active public participation further consolidate the institutional foundation of modern national governance, providing a solid institutional guarantee for the steady and long-term progress of modernization.

2) International Dimension

In the international dimension, the successful practice of Chinese-style Modernization has, with indisputable facts, broken the discursive monopoly that “modernization equals Westernization.” It has revealed to the world the diversity of paths to modernization, thereby deconstructing the “linear evolution” view of history that has long dominated the international discourse system [7]. It is not only a breakthrough of the existing paradigm but also a constructive contribution, providing a brand-new model and valuable experience for the vast number of developing countries to achieve catch-up development based on their own national conditions [9]. Furthermore, by advocating the building of a community with a shared future for mankind and proposing global development initiatives, China is promoting the reform of the global governance system towards a more just and reasonable direction. This is, in essence, a transcendence of Eurocentrism and hegemonic logic, contributing a Chinese solution full of Eastern wisdom to closing the global peace and development deficits.

1.2. The Experience of International Students in China

With China’s rise on the global stage, the cause of education for international stu-

dents in China has achieved considerable development, making China the largest destination for study in Asia and one of the foremost in the world [10]. However, against the macro backdrop of a significant increase in the number of international students, their individual experiences in China exhibit a high degree of complexity and diversity. Based on a comprehensive review of multiple research findings, the experience of international students in China is a dynamic process involving psychological adjustment, social integration, academic challenges, and the renegotiation of identity.

1.2.1. Universal Patterns and Local Characteristics of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Upon arriving in China, international students first face the challenge of cross-cultural adaptation. This process not only follows internationally common theoretical models but also presents unique characteristics due to the specific context of China.

The classic “U-curve” adaptation model has been validated among international students in China. This model depicts students moving from the initial excitement of the “honeymoon period” to a “crisis period” of loss and confusion caused by cultural conflict, then to a “recovery period” of gradually understanding and accepting the new environment, and finally reaching a “period of adjustment” of psychological equilibrium [11]. An empirical study on international students in China found that the trajectory of their emotional stability largely conforms to the “U-curve.” Students often experience the most significant emotional troughs in their first year, followed by a gradual recovery, indicating that the first year is a “critical period” for their psychological adaptation [12].

However, the adaptation of international students is not one-dimensional. Scholars usually divide it into two levels: psychological adaptation, which concerns internal happiness and stress; and socio-cultural adaptation, which relates to the ability to effectively integrate into the local society and handle daily affairs [13]. Research has found that although students’ emotions may fluctuate, their cognitive and behavioral adaptation may not change significantly during their stay. A key structural reason behind this is the management model prevalent in Chinese universities, which leads to a natural separation between Chinese and international students. For example, the establishment of separate dormitories and specialized courses for international students limits their opportunities for deep and frequent interaction with Chinese society, thereby affecting their process of socio-cultural adaptation [14].

1.2.2. The Predicament of Social Integration

Social integration is at the core of the international student experience in China and is also a prominent challenge they currently face. Although Chinese and international students are on the same campus, meaningful and deep-level interaction between them is generally lacking.

Research indicates that their contact often carries a distinct “instrumental” color, with many interactions originating from utilitarian purposes. For example,

Chinese students hope to practice a foreign language, while international students seek help when encountering language or daily life difficulties [15]. This type of superficial, “instrumental” relationship is difficult to develop into stable friendships, hindering deep cultural understanding. Furthermore, linguistic and cultural differences form a natural barrier. Most international students have limited proficiency in Chinese, making it difficult to engage in complex emotional and intellectual exchanges, while differences in cultural values, life customs, and religious beliefs often lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. These obstacles cause international students to tend to retreat into “mono-cultural friend circles” composed of their compatriots for emotional support and identity affirmation, further solidifying the social barriers with the Chinese student community. One survey showed that as many as 31.8% of international students in China reported having no Chinese friends [15]. This social isolation not only affects the students' life satisfaction but also limits their opportunities to learn about Chinese culture and improve their language skills through authentic interaction, thereby diminishing their study abroad experience.

1.2.3. Academic Challenges and Tensions

In the course of their studies in China, for non-Chinese-taught programs, the quality of English instruction in some courses is uneven; for Chinese-taught programs, specialized vocabulary becomes a major obstacle [14]. A deeper challenge comes from differences in teaching models. Chinese classroom culture emphasizes respect for authority and collective harmony, whereas many international students, especially those from Western countries, are accustomed to critical thinking and classroom debate. This cultural conflict may cause them to feel repressed in class or to develop tense relationships with their teachers, even affecting their willingness to complete their studies [16].

International students in China come from diverse countries with varied educational backgrounds, leading to significant disparities in academic levels within the same classroom. This poses a major challenge for teaching and also affects academic interaction among students. Some students from developed countries may feel that the course content and the level of their peers do not meet their academic expectations, while some students with weaker foundations may feel immense academic pressure [10].

1.2.4. Identity Negotiation and Diverse Adaptation Strategies

Faced with these challenges, international students are not passive recipients but active agents. They employ diverse strategies based on their personality, cultural background, and motivation for studying abroad to negotiate their identity and construct a unique life model in China.

Qualitative research shows that there are significant individual differences in students' adaptation strategies. Some students choose “resistance,” adhering to their native culture and behavioral patterns, and holding a critical or detached attitude toward Chinese culture; their social circles are also strictly limited to in-

international students. Other students adopt a “integration” strategy; they actively learn Chinese, make friends with Chinese people, experience local life deeply, and even integrate deeply into Chinese society through means such as transnational marriage. These students often find a comfortable “intermediate space” between the two cultures, forming a “sandwich culture layer” or a hybrid identity that retains their native cultural roots while absorbing elements of Chinese culture [17]. This successful integration not only brings higher life satisfaction but also makes their study abroad experience more valuable.

2. Literature Review

Research surrounding the role and pathways of international students in communicating the ideals of Chinese-style Modernization has become a focal point in Chinese academia, particularly in fields such as International Chinese Language Education, Journalism and Communication, and Ideological and Political Education. A general consensus has formed in existing research: international students, as firsthand witnesses and participants in China’s development, possess an irreplaceable strategic value in dispelling Western stereotypes and constructing China’s image, owing to their unique cross-cultural identity and perspective. Overall, relevant domestic research combines theoretical depth with practical concern, with its core aim being to explore how to transform the individual communication potential of international students into effective kinetic energy for building the nation’s international communication capacity.

2.1. The Historical Evolution and Contemporary Mission of the Student Group

Historically, foreign groups studying in China have also played an indispensable role as communicators and mediators in the interaction between China and the world. This long-standing tradition provides a profound historical mirror for today’s international students as storytellers of China. In fact, the term “留学生” (liúxuéshēng, international student) itself originates from ancient educational practices in China. In the Tang Dynasty, for example, Japanese envoys (“遣唐使,” qiǎntángshǐ) often brought young students to China. A portion of them were intentionally “left” (留, liú) to continue their studies after the mission returned home, in order to systematically and deeply research Chinese culture. These individuals were habitually called “留学生” [18]. Upon returning to their home country, they brought back the advanced civilization of the Tang Dynasty, profoundly influencing their society’s development and objectively disseminating the brilliant achievements of Chinese civilization throughout East Asia.

By the Ming and Qing dynasties, Western scholars and missionaries represented by figures like Matteo Ricci, although bearing multiple missions, also had in-depth study and observation at the core of their activities in China. They immersed themselves in the study of the Chinese language, Confucian classics, and societal customs, and through letters and writings, they systematically introduced

a complex and advanced Chinese civilization to the Western world, playing a key role in the process of “Eastern knowledge spreading to the West” [19]. These historical pioneers demonstrated that foreign learners within the Chinese cultural environment are able to observe and understand from a unique “insider’s perspective,” and the narratives they form are more persuasive due to their firsthand nature. This historical legacy reveals the inherent attribute of the international student community in China as communicators of Chinese culture and development. They have always been a precious bridge connecting China and the world, and an indispensable messenger for the international community to understand China.

2.2. The Unique Advantages of International Students as Communication Agents

Academic research widely agrees that international students possess advantages that are difficult for other agents to match when communicating the ideals of Chinese-style Modernization. First, they have a narrative capacity that combines “localization and internationalization.” They can perceive China from the perspective of a firsthand witness and interpret it through the lens of their native cultural background. This is far more than a translation at the linguistic level; it includes a deep interpretation of social phenomena, policy logic, and even cultural psychology. Their narratives are more easily accepted and understood by international audiences, effectively avoiding the risk of antagonism that official narratives might face [20]. Second, their “other’s perspective” or “third-party” identity in the international public opinion sphere often makes positive evaluations from external sources more persuasive than self-proclamation. When an international student, speaking as a witness, describes China’s achievements in poverty alleviation, technological innovation, or social governance, this “testimonial communication” can powerfully refute long-standing stereotypes and misinformation in the Western world, making their narrative more objective and credible. The stories of China’s achievements and paths, as told by them, can break the long-standing stereotypes in the Western world, presenting a “true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic China” [21]. This authenticity is reflected in the fact that their narratives often contain complex details and personalized feelings, including both praise for brilliant achievements and possibly observations and reflections on certain social issues. It shows the world that China is not a country defined by simple labels, but a vibrant, constantly evolving, and authentic society full of the vitality of daily life.

Furthermore, this group is in a critical period of forming their worldview, outlook on life, and values. Through their study and life in China, they are easily influenced and inspired by Chinese culture and social practices, thus forming a profound cultural identification. This identification, based on personal experience and emotional resonance, is the internal driving force for their active and effective communication of China’s stories, making their content more persuasive and appealing [22].

2.3. Constructing the Pathways for International Communication of Chinese-Style Modernization

To transform the communication potential of international students into practical effectiveness, a large number of scholars have explored and proposed a series of systematic implementation pathways from multiple dimensions, such as content construction, educational models, and practical platforms. The core logic lies in guiding students through a deepening process from “understanding China” to “reading China deeply,” and then to “telling China’s stories well.”

2.3.1. Using the “First Classroom” as a Foundation to Deepen Theoretical Cognition

The first classroom is the primary front for international students to understand the stories of Chinese-style Modernization. Research indicates that the existing national conditions education curriculum system, such as “China Survey,” must be reformed and optimized to overcome problems like outdated content, monotonous formats, and poor teaching effectiveness. Course content should be integrated with the historical context, theoretical connotations, and latest practical achievements of Chinese-style Modernization, and combined with professional education. For example, offering a specialized course on “Science and Technology in China” for science and engineering students, which tells the story of the institutional advantages and cultural spirit behind China’s technological development [23]. The teaching goal is to help students not only “know what it is” but also “know why it is so,” accurately grasping that Chinese-style Modernization is not a simple copy of the Western model, but a unique creation rooted in its own national conditions and cultural traditions.

2.3.2. Vitalizing the “Second Classroom” to Promote Experiential Perception

The “second classroom” is regarded as a key link for integrating theory with practice and deepening emotional identification [24]. By organizing students to participate in social practice, cultural experiences, and corporate visits, they can personally feel the developmental changes in Chinese society [25]. These activities include visiting rural revitalization bases, high-tech enterprises, and red education bases, allowing students to have an immersive experience of the practical achievements of China’s path by “traveling ten thousand miles,” thereby internalizing textbook knowledge into vivid and tangible personal experiences. This experience of witnessing firsthand becomes the most vivid and powerful source material for them when they tell China’s stories in the future.

2.3.3. Expanding the “Third and Fourth Classrooms” to Empower Communication Practice

To promote the completion of the students’ identity transformation, building a practical platform is crucial. Scholars have proposed expanding the pathways of the “third classroom” (various competition activities) and the “fourth classroom” (online new media). By hosting short video contests like “Understanding Con-

temporary China” and innovation and entrepreneurship competitions, students are provided with a stage for display and exchange, encouraging them to create visual communication products from what they have learned and felt [25]. At the same time, universities should strengthen the cultivation of students’ ability to use new media, encouraging and supporting them to establish personal discourse platforms on international social media, and to conduct precise and effective international communication using digital narrative methods [20].

3. The Current State of International Students' Promotion of the Ideals of Chinese-Style Modernization

Against the backdrop of increasingly fierce competition for global discourse power, Chinese-style Modernization, as an important public good and development model provided by China to the world, has its international communication effectiveness become a key indicator for measuring the country’s cultural soft power and influence. In this process, the international student community, with their unique “other’s perspective” and “on-site” experience, has become an indispensable bridge for promoting the ideals of Chinese-style Modernization to the world [26]. However, an examination of the current situation reveals that international students in this communication practice present a complex picture where advantages and difficulties coexist, and where spontaneity and limitations are intertwined.

3.1. The Unique Advantages of Personalized Narrative and Cross-Cultural Interpretation

In the field of international communication, official grand narratives, while authoritative, are often difficult to be fully understood in a cross-cultural context due to their inherent political nature, top-down communication style, and abstract theoretical language. International students, as a non-official and independent narrative subject, have their most significant advantage in being able to bypass this dilemma. The narratives they construct are based on individual experience and are life-oriented micro-narratives. This narrative paradigm does not directly engage in theoretical indoctrination but shares grand national concepts by transforming them into perceptible individual stories, thereby fundamentally reshaping the credibility and appeal of the communication content.

3.1.1. Dispelling Prejudice and Personifying Concepts

The firsthand narratives of the international student community, by virtue of their irreplaceable authenticity and “sense of presence,” have become a powerful tool for dispelling external stereotypes and endowing abstract concepts with a human dimension.

This narrative method is an effective “disenchantment” of the entrenched prejudices in the Western public opinion sphere. For a long time, some Western media reports on China have often focused on ideological differences, creating a stereotyped, and even demonized, image. The vlogs or short videos published by in-

international students on social media [27] provide a completely different window of observation. When an African student shows how to manage daily life in China with just a mobile phone, when a European student records their experience participating in garbage sorting and community environmental activities, when a Latin American student shares the vibrant vitality they have seen in rural revitalization projects, these vivid individual experiences, with an irrefutable authenticity, challenge and dismantle the old prejudices about China being “closed,” “backward,” or “disregarding the environment.” This type of narrative, derived from real life, is not a direct rebuttal but rather presents a modern, pluralistic, and vibrant real China, allowing prejudices to collapse on their own.

This is a process of vividly personifying the core concepts of Chinese-style Modernization. “Harmony between man and nature” is no longer just a policy slogan, but the pocket parks and clear rivers visible everywhere in the students’ videos; “coordination of material and spiritual civilization” is no longer an abstract theory, but the endless stream of visitors in the museums and art galleries next to bustling commercial districts, and the rich cultural activities in the communities, as captured by the students’ cameras. Through these concrete, tangible daily scenes, students internalize the grand concepts of Chinese-style Modernization into the quality of life, spiritual pursuits, and value choices of ordinary people, thus enabling international audiences to resonate emotionally and to establish an initial identification with and intuitive understanding of “so this is Chinese-style Modernization.”

3.1.2. Precise Interpretation and Deep Resonance

The unique cross-cultural identity of international students allows them to naturally play the dual roles of “cultural translator” and “issue resonator,” greatly enhancing the precision and penetration of communication.

As “cultural translators,” the international student community achieves a leap from linguistic translation to conceptual interpretation. “Common prosperity,” if translated directly, might be misunderstood in some cultural contexts. However, a student from a developing country facing similar challenges of wealth disparity can, by combining it with their own national conditions and telling stories of China’s targeted poverty alleviation and east-west cooperation, interpret it as a development model aimed at “leaving no one behind.” Similarly, “whole-process people’s democracy” can be translated through students’ experiences of participating in community council meetings and observing local legislative hearings into a governance practice that is close to the people and solves practical problems. This kind of localized interpretation transcends literal translation, delves into the level of values, and effectively reduces the barriers to understanding caused by cultural and institutional differences [28].

As “issue resonators,” they find the connection between China’s stories and global concerns. For many students from countries along the “Belt and Road,” China’s experience in infrastructure construction, digital economy development, and green energy transition are precisely the issues that need to be addressed in

their own countries' modernization processes. When they tell of China's experience, they are not just telling "China's story," but also exploring a "common path of development." This narrative, based on the demand for common development, transcends the simple display of a national image and has stronger practical significance and a problem-oriented focus. It can stimulate deeper thinking and resonance, thereby powerfully penetrating the ideological barriers set up by some Western public opinion fields and allowing the global significance of Chinese-style Modernization to be more widely recognized.

3.2. The Structural Obstacles from "Cultural Experience" to "Conceptual Communication"

Although the international student community shows great communication potential with their unique individual narratives, this potential is largely still in a spontaneous, fragmented, and superficial state. To achieve a qualitative leap from "sharing interesting Chinese culture" to "communicating profound Chinese concepts," they face a series of intertwined challenges. These challenges stem not only from individual limitations but are also deeply rooted in the educational system, the discourse environment, and the international public opinion landscape.

3.2.1. The Fragmented Communication Predicament due to a Lack of Cognitive Depth

The core goal for most international students coming to China is to obtain a specific degree or to improve their language skills, not to become experts on China. Their curriculum is also designed around this goal. Even the specialized cultural courses that are offered suffer from problems like "fragmented resources, monotonous models, and weak practical links" [29]. These courses often focus on teaching traditional cultural symbols (like Peking Opera, calligraphy, tea art) or providing general introductions, but rarely delve into the political and economic logic, the philosophy of national governance, and the historical and civilizational roots behind Chinese-style Modernization. Due to the lack of deep theoretical grounding, the communication content of students inevitably appears fragmented and situational. They can use a camera to record the breathtaking speed of high-speed rail, but they find it difficult to explain the strategic determination behind China's long-term planning and infrastructure construction; they can showcase the convenience of digital payments, but they can hardly articulate the combined effect of China's digital infrastructure development, its policy environment that encourages innovation, and its vast unified market. This type of communication, although vivid and intuitive, often remains at the surface level of showcasing the achievements of modernization. It is like sending out beautiful but shallowly explained "postcards," which makes it difficult to guide the audience to think more deeply, thus limiting the intellectual penetration of the communication.

3.2.2. The Efficacy Bottleneck due to a Lack of Discourse Conversion Ability

Research clearly indicates that the international student community generally

faces the problems of “limited Chinese proficiency” and “a lack of deep understanding and identification with Chinese culture” [28]. “Chinese proficiency” here refers not only to daily communication but also to the ability to use precise, complex language to explain abstract concepts and to engage in theoretical debate. For example, to clearly explain the differences between “whole-process people’s democracy” and electoral democracy to an audience raised in a Western discourse system requires an extremely high level of linguistic mastery and profound cultural understanding. When the students’ own cognition is still at a vague, perceptual level, their language will naturally struggle to be clear and forceful. This deficiency in discourse conversion ability is particularly prominent when facing external questions and challenges. When a student shares the safety and harmony of China, they might be met with sharp questions in the comments section about human rights and freedom. At that point, if they can only repeatedly emphasize their personal feelings and cannot provide convincing explanations from the perspectives of institutional design, historical tradition, and governance logic, then their explanations will appear pale and powerless [26]. This predicament of being “adept at storytelling yet weak in theoretical reasoning” makes their communication easily fall into a defensive posture when facing complex public opinion debates, and their narratives are also more likely to be interpreted by the audience through pre-existing, dominant Western discourse frameworks, ultimately leading to a greatly diminished communication effect.

3.2.3. Fighting a Lonely Battle Amidst Public Opinion Pressure and a Lack of Educational Cultivation

In the current international public opinion landscape of “the West being strong and China being weak” [30], any positive narrative about China faces the significant risk of being labeled. Once international students publish content praising China, they are very easily labeled as “paid to post” or “propaganda,” leading to their narrative’s authenticity and motivation being questioned. This immense public opinion pressure not only dampens the students’ enthusiasm for communication but also causes many to choose silence or to share only innocuous life details, resulting in these valuable positive voices being marginalized and drowned out in the vast noise of information. In stark contrast to the immense external pressure is the relative absence of an internal educational support system. Although domestic universities have gradually recognized the importance of students as communication agents, the construction of related cultivation mechanisms is far behind. Currently, universities generally lack a complete cultivation plan aimed at enhancing students’ cross-cultural communication skills and their ability to interpret concepts. This lack of a cultivation system means that the students’ communication activities can only remain in a state of individual spontaneity, making it difficult to form a scaled effect and, more importantly, unable to constitute a sustained, professional, and resilient force for international communication.

4. The Strategic Significance of International Students in Promoting the Ideals of Chinese-Style Modernization

The international communication of Chinese-style Modernization is not just a display of national image; it is a profound dialogue about development paths and civilizational paradigms. In this process, the strategic significance of the international student community far exceeds the superficial role of “people’s ambassadors.” As emerging conduits of knowledge and experience, they are not only listeners of China’s stories but also potential narrators and communicators in the international arena [31]. They play an indispensable key role in breaking existing discourse patterns, transmitting China’s governance experience, and building long-term transnational cognitive trust.

4.1. Breaking the Monoculture of Modernization Narratives

In the international discourse field, the definition and interpretation of “modernization” itself is a form of power. For a long time, this power has been monopolized by a discourse system that originated from the specific historical experience of the West but was universalized into a “universal standard” [32]. This system contains a linear view of history with the West as its endpoint, often placing the modernization explorations of non-Western countries in the position of “imitators,” “deviants,” or “challengers,” thereby fundamentally denying the autonomy and legitimacy of other civilizations to independently explore paths to modernization. International students, as “others” who have deeply penetrated the fabric of Chinese society, provide highly persuasive experiential evidence to deconstruct this singular narrative and reshape the global cognitive landscape of modernization through their personal experiences and testimonies.

The value of the international student community lies in their ability to present an “alternative modernity” in a non-confrontational way. When a student shares how China, in its process of urbanization, has avoided the slumification and social disorder faced by many developing countries through “grassroots governance innovation” and “digital government” construction, what they convey is not a direct critique of the Western model, but an empirical demonstration of another successful governance paradigm. This kind of observation from within, and from a non-official source, can effectively bypass ideological barriers, showing the world that modernization is not a single path, thereby enriching the global understanding of the connotations of modernization [33].

These testimonies from “the other” liberate the core concepts of Chinese-style Modernization from theoretical texts, endowing them with a solid experiential and ontological status. It proves that these concepts are not floating slogans but are deeply rooted in the land of China, representing a practical logic that can genuinely solve problems and enhance the well-being of the people. It fundamentally shatters the attempt by the Western discourse system to “exceptionalize” or “heterogenized” China’s practice, making Chinese-style Modernization a credible, feasible, and reference-worthy new choice for modernization, which has earned

its due respect and attention in the global discourse field.

4.2. Providing Tangible Chinese Solutions for the Global South

For the vast number of developing countries in the Global South, the appeal of Chinese-style Modernization lies not only in its grand achievements but also in the specific paths it offers for solving common development challenges [33]. International students, especially those from these countries, are able to keenly capture and interpret the “Chinese experience” that best fits the needs of their home countries. The governance of the informal economy is an excellent example, as it touches upon a core pain point for most developing countries and best reflects the pragmatic wisdom of Chinese-style Modernization’s governance.

Many developing countries face a large and difficult-to-manage informal economy. This not only means huge tax losses and distorted market competition but also represents hundreds of millions of laborers who are in a vulnerable state with no legal protection, no social security, and unstable incomes [34]. Traditional governance methods, whether through forceful suppression or laissez-faire policies, often fall into a dilemma, becoming a persistent problem for national governance. What students from these countries observe in China is a completely different governance philosophy. The Chinese government does not simply view the informal economy as a problem to be eliminated, but as a sector with enormous vitality. It uses a series of institutional tools for “empowerment-based governance,” guiding it to gradually transform towards standardization and modernization.

When an African student shares a story from Yiwu about how a street vendor uses a mobile phone to manage inventory, take orders online, and use digital credit for loans, what he is communicating is far more than a general praise like “China’s economy is very developed.” He is actually conveying a concrete, highly operable “micro-governance solution”: how to use digital technology at a very low cost to integrate participants of the informal economy into the modern economic system and provide them with a ladder for growth. For the governments and people of the students’ home countries who face similar governance challenges, this story is highly enlightening and attractive, making the global significance of Chinese-style Modernization concrete, tangible, and full of practical charm.

4.3. Cultivating a Foundation of Strategic Trust among Transnational Elites

The highest realm of international communication is not the pursuit of one-way information output or short-term public opinion victories, but rather “influencing the influential.” Through long-term, in-depth exchanges, it aims to shape the cognitive frameworks of key actors on the future international stage. From the perspective of the strategic significance of study-in-China education, it aims to cultivate an international elite network that can move beyond superficial likes and dislikes to deeply understand the development path of China [35]. This is not just cultural exchange; it is a cognitive project concerning the future landscape of in-

ternational relations.

When these international students (future politicians, entrepreneurs, scholars, and media professionals) return to their home countries, the nuanced and complex “view of China” they have formed based on their personal experiences will become a valuable, intangible strategic asset [36]. At times of friction or even crisis in international relations, these elites who have lived in China can become rational “stabilizers” in their domestic public opinion and decision-making circles. When their national media is filled with biased reports or false information about China, they can, by virtue of their personal experiences, provide a more balanced and objective perspective. They may not become defenders of China, but they are more likely to become explainers, able to point out the multiple facets of an issue. Their presence raises the threshold for public opinion manipulation and policy misjudgment in their home countries, leaving valuable space for diplomatic maneuvering and crisis management. In daily international exchanges, these elites act as efficient “lubricants.” In business negotiations, they are well-versed in Chinese business culture and communication styles, able to effectively reduce transaction costs caused by cultural misunderstandings; in academic collaborations, they understand China’s scientific research system and academic ecosystem, able to establish trust and advance projects more quickly; in cultural exchanges, they can accurately find points of resonance between the two cultures and design more popular exchange programs. What they accumulate is not just knowledge, but also valuable personal networks and cultural capital, which will greatly promote the depth and breadth of bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

Ultimately, the final goal of this strategic investment is to cultivate, on a global scale, a fertile ground from which strategic trust can grow. Trust between nations must be based on deep mutual understanding. Study-in-China education is precisely the process of shaping the individual cognition of generations of international elites, which ultimately converges into a collective, transnational, and deep understanding of China’s development path. This cognitive foundation, which transcends superficial goodwill, is indispensable for building long-term, stable, and predictable international relations. It creates a more favorable international environment for China’s peaceful development and also cultivates the most precious “fellow travelers” for promoting the grand vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind.

5. Analysis and Conclusions

By reviewing existing research, this paper has depicted the role played by international students in the international communication of the story of Chinese-style Modernization. The research clearly shows that this group of foreign observers within China is a valuable window for presenting a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic China to the world. However, after in-depth analysis, we find that to truly leverage their role, we must confront and resolve a fundamental contradiction and correspondingly shift our thinking.

5.1. Analysis of the Core Contradiction

Existing research clearly shows that the greatest advantage of communication by international students stems from the authenticity of their individual experiences; these firsthand narratives can effectively penetrate the filter of prejudice in the international public opinion sphere. However, the research also reveals their fatal weakness. Although the international student community is adept at communicating Chinese-style Modernization through vivid and concrete personal experiences, showing strong emotional persuasiveness, they find it difficult to provide rigorous rational explanations from theoretical, logical, or institutional perspectives when faced with deeper questions and challenges from the West. This makes their narratives, though authentic and credible, appear pale and powerless when ideological confrontation and logical defense are required, thereby limiting the intellectual penetration of their communication and its lasting influence in a complex public opinion environment. The essence of this phenomenon is not a simple issue of language proficiency, but a disconnect between “experience and interpretation.” The international student community is immersed in the fabric of Chinese society; they experience the convenience of mobile payments, the speed of high-speed rail, the safety of cities, and the vitality of communities. However, when they face inquiries from the outside world based on different knowledge systems and ideological frameworks, they generally lack the ability to effectively translate these phenomena into a conceptual system with academic depth and cross-cultural persuasiveness. They can show “what is,” but find it difficult to clearly articulate the deep motivations behind it. The root of this disconnect lies in the fact that the current cultivation model still largely regards international students as experiencers of Chinese culture, rather than interpreters of Chinese civilization. It fails to provide them with the necessary cognitive education to help them complete the intellectual leap from perceptual experience to rational cognition, and then to discourse construction. This is the core bottleneck that constrains international students from realizing their full potential in international communication.

5.2. The Strategic Path Upgrade

In response to this core contradiction, the future cultivation path for the international communication abilities of international students must achieve a fundamental strategic upgrade: a shift from simple “communication empowerment” to systematic “interpretation cultivation”. The former focuses on teaching students how to use new media skills and how to package stories; the latter focuses on cultivating their ability to deeply understand the internal logic of Chinese-style Modernization and to engage in cross-cultural theoretical dialogue. This is not just an adjustment of educational methods, but a profound intellectual project aimed at shaping the cognitive frameworks of future global elites.

This means that the national conditions education, with the “first classroom” at its core, must undergo a paradigm revolution. It needs to move beyond general

knowledge dissemination to problem-oriented comparative civilizational studies, guiding students to profoundly understand the unique logic and institutional advantages of the Chinese model in addressing global challenges such as population, environment, and governance, through comparison with Western modernization models. At the same time, the social practice of the “second classroom” should also transition from superficial experience to in-depth understanding, encouraging students to enter the social scene of China with research questions, turning their cross-cultural perspectives into a valuable analytical resource, and producing in-depth observation reports and case studies. This educational model, with “cultivating interpretation ability” as its core, aims to transform students from passive information receivers and spontaneous story sharers into active “producers of meaning.” They will not only be able to share what they see and hear in China but also be able to explain the deep structures and civilizational foundations behind these observations to the world in a balanced and rational manner.

5.3. Reshaping the Ultimate Vision

In summary, the final conclusion of this study is that the highest strategic value of international students in China’s international communication is not to shape them into propagandists for China’s official stance, as the credibility of such a role is naturally limited in the international public opinion sphere. Their true value lies in cultivating them, through long-term, in-depth, and high-quality educational interaction, into a “transnational cognitive community” capable of profoundly understanding and rationally evaluating China’s development path.

The members of this community may not be in complete agreement with China’s position on all issues in the future, and may even become China’s “critical friends”. But it is precisely this complex, non-simplistic cognition based on deep understanding that enables them to act as a bulwark against extremism and information manipulation in their home societies. Their very existence is a powerful antidote to simplistic narratives like the “China threat theory,” providing possibilities for building a more rational, pluralistic, and inclusive global conversational space. Therefore, the success of this endeavor should not be measured by how many videos are produced that “speak well of China,” but by how many future global leaders are cultivated who can think independently, engage in rational dialogue, and hold a deep sense of empathy for the diversity of human civilizations. This is not only about winning understanding for China; it is about making a far-reaching contribution to winning a more peaceful and rational future for the world.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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