

International Students as the Disseminator of Chinese Culture: An Emotional Community Perspective

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China has increasingly moved toward the center of the global stage; however, its soft power has not attained a level commensurate with its rapid economic growth. One important factor underlying this disparity lies in the insufficient attention to emotional dimensions in the international dissemination of Chinese culture. Drawing on Ferdinand Tönnies's concept of community and Barbara Rosenwein's theory of emotional communities, this study examines the distinctive advantages of international students in China in the dissemination of Chinese culture. Taking international student education at the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC) as an example, the paper further proposes practical measures to strengthening the role of international students in promoting Chinese culture internationally.

Keywords: international student, disseminator of Chinese culture, emotional community

Introduction

Since the implementation of economic reforms and the policy of opening up, China has experienced rapid economic growth and increasing global influence. China is now the world's second-largest economy and plays an increasingly important role in global governance, trade, and technological development. Joseph Nye cited a survey carried out in 2008, claiming that China's soft power is less than that of the United States, and that "China's charm offensive has thus far been ineffective" (Nye, 2011, p. 89). Shambaugh (2015, p. 6) also observes that "China possesses little soft power, if any, and is not a model for other nations to emulate".

In recent years, China invested heavily in international communication initiatives, but China still faces notable challenges in projecting its cultural narratives globally. Prof. SUN Zhou (2025, pp. 142-156) pointed out that "the global narration of Chinese civilization faces a persistent dilemma: although its arguments are well grounded, they are often difficult to articulate effectively, and even when articulated, they fail to achieve broad international resonance". The reasons for this phenomenon are diverse, and one significant reason is the lack of emotional connection in cross-cultural communication. Cross-cultural communication is not only about

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transmitting information but also about sharing emotional meanings. Emotions play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and collective identities (Ahmed, 2014). Cultural narratives resonate with audiences only when they evoke shared emotional experiences.

In the era of globalization, studying in China has become the choice of an increasing number of international students. According to statistics released by the Ministry of Education in 2024, the total number of international students studying in China has exceeded 500,000. China has become one of the leading destinations for international students in Asia and ranks among the top globally, with the influence of the “Study in China” brand continuing to expand (Duan, 2026).

Emotional Communities: Theoretical Framework

Ferdinand Tönnies: Community

Ferdinand Tönnies, in his seminal work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft (1887)*, distinguishes between an “organic” community (*Gemeinschaft*), bound together by ties of kinship, fellowship, custom, history and communal ownership of primary goods, and a “mechanical” society (*Gesellschaft*), where free-standing individuals interacted with each other through self-interest, commercial contracts, a “spatial” rather than “historical” sense of mutual awareness, and the external constraints of formally enacted laws (Tönnies, 2001, pp. xvii-xviii). Within the framework of *Gemeinschaft*, Tönnies further differentiates three different forms of communal bonding: community by blood, community of place, and community of spirit (Tönnies, 2001). The most important community is the last one, the community of spirit, which is “based on shared work or calling, and thus on shared beliefs” (Tönnies, 2001, p. 204).

Tönnies’ model provides a useful analytical lens for the role international students in China can function as culturally embedded mediators in the global dissemination of Chinese culture. Universities play a central role in cultivating the international students for the dissemination of Chinese cultures worldwide. Academic seminars, intercultural dialogue platforms, and courses on Chinese language, philosophy, governance, and cultural ethics, etc., facilitate the formation of interpretive alignment. When international students engage with core Chinese intellectual traditions—such as harmony (*he*), relational ethics, and ecological thought—they may develop a reflective form of cultural affinity that transcends instrumental understanding.

Barbara H. Rosenwein: Emotional Communities

Building on earlier sociological discussions of emotion, American historian Barbara H. Rosenwein introduced the concept of “emotional communities”. In her famous book *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, Rosenwein defines emotional communities as groups in which people “adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value-or devalue-the same or related emotions” (Rosenwein, 2006, p. 2). According to Rosenwein, different communities develop distinct emotional repertoires. These repertoires determine which emotions are considered appropriate, how they should be expressed, and how they are interpreted by others. Emotional norms therefore function as cultural codes embedded within social life.

When individuals move from one culture to another, they encounter different emotional norms. Learning to adapt to these norms requires emotional adaptation and cultural interpretation. For international students in China, they must understand multiple emotional repertoires and serve as mediators between different emotional communities, which will be of great help in the dissemination of Chinese culture worldwide.

Emotional Communities in Cross-Cultural Communication

The concept of emotional communities proposed by Rosenwein provides a useful lens for analyzing cross-cultural communication. Cultural misunderstandings often arise not only from linguistic differences but also from differences in emotional norms. For instance, practices such as collective celebrations, expressions of respect toward elders, or forms of social hospitality may carry different emotional meanings in different cultural contexts.

International students studying abroad often undergo precisely this process of emotional learning. Living within another society exposes themselves to everyday emotional practices—family relations, friendship norms, festival celebrations, and social etiquette. Through these experiences, they gradually acquire the ability to navigate multiple emotional communities.

Consequently, international students can function as mediators in cross-cultural communication. Their experiences enable them to translate not only linguistic meanings but also emotional contexts. This capacity makes them particularly valuable actors in the dissemination of cultural narratives.

International Students as Chinese Culture Disseminator

Based on the introduction of the emotional frameworks of Tönnies and Rosenwein it is evident that emotion plays a crucial role in cross-cultural communication and the construction of cultural identity.

Within this theoretical framework, international students in China, as bicultural individuals, are deeply immersed in Chinese cultural practices while maintaining their native language and cultural knowledge, giving them a unique advantage in international cultural dissemination. Through emotional engagement in learning, daily life, and social interactions, these students internalize Chinese cultural values and aesthetic experiences, and can transmit these cultural elements to their home cultural environments in emotionally resonant and tangible ways. This emotion-based cross-cultural dissemination not only enhances the effectiveness of cultural transmission but also strengthens cultural identification and affective connections, positioning international students in China as key nodes in the projection of China's cultural soft power.

Credible Experiential Witnesses

It is only through direct, personal engagement with a culture that individuals develop a deeper emotional and cognitive understanding of it. Experiential immersion allows individuals to move beyond abstract or second-hand knowledge, fostering emotional connections and embodied understanding. One of the most significant advantages of international students in cultural communication lies in their identity as experiential witnesses. Unlike official spokespersons or media organizations, international students participate directly in everyday social life. They encounter Chinese culture not through abstract descriptions but through concrete experiences. For example, the students in University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (hereinafter referred to as UESTC), the university the author is from, experience Chinese culture directly through many concrete events organized by the International Office. They organize culture visits such as Sanxingdui Ruins, Jiuzhaigou Valley, known as the “paradise on earth”, Du Fu's Thatched Cottage, etc. Their experience of Chinese culture does not come from books, but from real and tangible experiences. When these students return to their home countries, they often share these experiences through social networks, personal blogs, and informal conversations. These narratives contribute to what scholars describe as “grassroots cultural diplomacy”, which spread organically through personal networks. People-to-people communication plays an increasingly important role in shaping international perceptions of China. International students who have lived in China can therefore function as informal cultural ambassadors.

Bridges Between Emotional Communities

After personally experiencing Chinese culture, international students in China can function as bridges between different emotional communities, playing a significant role in the international dissemination of Chinese culture. As Rosenwein (2006) emphasizes, emotional communities are groups with shared norms of emotional expression and evaluation. Individuals who understand multiple modes of emotional expression are better equipped to foster cross-cultural understanding. During their studies in China, international students gradually learn to interpret Chinese emotional norms. For instance, Chinese culture emphasizes “harmony as precious” (He Wei Gui), often discouraging overt expression of dissenting opinions. Social hierarchies are respected, and family-centered values remain foundational, reflecting a deeply ingrained emotional framework unique to China.

Practical engagement with emotional norms across cultures often renders otherwise abstract cultural principles tangible and comprehensible. For example, in a classroom activity, the author guided international students to watch the Chinese science fiction film *The Wandering Earth 2*. In one scene, astronauts are recruited for a mission to detonate a nuclear device—an irreversible, one-way task. The character ZHANG Peng instructs all Chinese astronauts above the age of fifty to volunteer. In many Western cultural frameworks influenced by liberal individualism, this seems unfair. In their culture, fairness is often understood as the equal distribution of risk and opportunity regardless of age or status. From this perspective, assigning a life-ending mission to a particular age group may seem inconsistent with the principle of equal individual rights and the protection of personal life choices. However, within the context of Chinese cultural traditions, the emotional logic underlying this scene is interpreted quite differently. Chinese moral thought has long been shaped by values emphasizing collective responsibility and the willingness of elders to assume greater responsibilities for the protection of younger generations. In this framework, age is not about seniority, but moral responsibility. The sacrifice of older individuals for the continuation of the community and the civilization resonates with widely shared emotional ideals such as devotion to the collective, intergenerational duty, and the Confucian virtue of placing communal survival above personal interest. It would be extremely difficult for foreigners without this Chinese cultural background to comprehend the emotional depth inherent in it.

Emotional Mediators and the Expansion of Emotional Communities

International students may also serve as affective emotional mediators who help extend emotional networks across national boundaries. During their everyday lives in China, many students gradually develop emotional attachments to local people, local places, cultural practices, and social environments. These attachments not only reshape their personal identities but also connect emotional experiences across cultures.

For international students, such attachments often emerge through direct engagement with the everyday life of the host city. A Nepalese student studying in UESTC, for example, described how he fell in love with UESTC, and Chengdu, the city where the University is located: “I have been to many places in Chengdu, all of which are amazing and full of historical charm”. After several years of living there, he developed a deep attachment not only to the city’s physical environment but also to its distinctive cultural atmosphere.

These experiences demonstrate how emotional networks are formed through everyday participation in local life. By building connections with places, people, and cultural practices, international students become embedded in new affective landscapes that link their home cultures with Chinese society. Importantly, these attachments often continue after students return to their home countries. Positive experiences—such as friendships with Chinese peers, appreciation for Chinese cuisine, or admiration for urban cultural life—can leave lasting emotional

impressions.

After returning to their own motherland, these international students may remain connected to China through alumni associations, Chinese cultural organizations, or online communities discussing Chinese culture. In this way, the emotional ties formed during their time in China continue to circulate within new social networks, gradually expanding emotional communities beyond national borders.

Cultural Translator

Culture occupies a central position in communication, particularly in cross-cultural contexts where it often exerts a more decisive influence than language itself. Bassnett argues that Translation Studies underwent a significant “cultural turn” in the 1990s (Bassnett, 2014, p. 11), signaling a paradigmatic shift from linguistic equivalence to cultural mediation as the core concern of translation theory. Consequently, contemporary translators increasingly emphasize cultural dimensions in their practice (Bassnett, 2014), acknowledging that translation involves not merely the transfer of linguistic forms but also the negotiation of culturally situated meanings.

International students come to China for different reasons: travelling, cultural visits, business, and study. Many of them come to China for master’s and doctoral degrees, which means they will need to stay in China for two years or even longer, participate in everyday social life, interact with Chinese peers, and experience Chinese cultural practices directly. Their experiences provide them with unique perspectives that differ both from official narratives and from distant external observations.

They will, more often than not, assume the role of cultural translator. Cultural translation goes beyond linguistic translation; it involves interpreting cultural practices in ways that make sense within another cultural context. Having lived in China while maintaining connections with their home cultures, international students often understand not only the Chinese language, but also the Chinese culture as well as their own culture. This dual perspective enables them to explain Chinese cultural practices in ways that resonate with foreign audiences. A case in point is Yasser Mahamad Senoussi Ahmad (Hemai Ye), a Chadian undergraduate student of Grade 2022 from the School of Life Science and Technology in UESTC. He won the title of “Perception of China Communication Envoy” in the 2025 “Perceiving China” Annual Person Selection hosted by the China Scholarship Council. The documentary short film “Tracing China: The Chadian Twins’ Comfortable Life in Chengdu”, co-produced by him and his twin brother, showcases the contemporary China through authentic and vivid footage. Within just five months of its release, the film has garnered over 1.63 million views across the internet (School of Life Science and Technology, UESTC, 2026).

In this sense, international students function not only as cultural messengers but also as interpreters of cultural meaning. Their ability to translate cultural narratives across contexts represents a valuable resource for international communication.

Strengthening Emotional Dimensions of Cultural Communication

From the theory of emotional communities, we can see that the learning process of international students in China is not only about acquiring knowledge, but also about cultivating emotions. Through personal participation in festivals, intangible cultural heritage inheritance, and other practices, international students can transform from “understanding” to “identification”, thereby becoming voluntary disseminators of Chinese culture.

It is necessary to develop a more nuanced understanding of the role that international students play in processes of cultural communication. To this end, a set of targeted measures should be implemented, which are

outlined below.

Enhancing Experiential Cultural Programs

As is mentioned above, experiential learning plays a crucial role in language acquisition and intercultural understanding. From the perspective of community theory, emotional bonds formed through shared experiences significantly shape individuals' cultural perception and identity construction. Meaningful social relationships are often built through emotional engagement rather than purely cognitive knowledge transmission. Within this framework, the concept of an emotional communities highlights how shared experiences generate emotional attachment and mutual understanding among participants. When international students participate in local cultural practices—such as traditional festivals, family gatherings, or community activities—they do not merely observe cultural symbols; they engage with the emotional and social meanings embedded in those practices.

For universities hosting international students in China, this perspective suggests the importance of developing structured experiential cultural programs. While classroom-based instruction remains essential for systematic language training, it is insufficient for cultivating a nuanced understanding of Chinese society and culture. Universities should therefore design courses and programs that integrate direct cultural participation into the learning process. These may include activities such as Chinese tea culture workshops, calligraphy practice, traditional craft sessions, local community visits, and participation in major cultural festivals. Field-based learning in historical sites, cultural heritage locations, and local neighborhoods can also provide valuable opportunities for students to experience everyday Chinese life. Take UESTC for example. The University has been holding the International Education Exchange Week since 2010. During the week, international students from various countries wear their traditional clothing, prepare their traditional cuisine, and interact deeply with Chinese students. At the same time, the University also arranges for international students to participate in various Chinese cultural activities, such as learning Chinese cooking techniques, allowing them to deeply experience Chinese culture.

Building Platforms for Cross-Cultural Emotional Exchange

Universities should create platforms that facilitate ongoing cross-cultural dialogue. Digital media platforms, alumni networks, and cultural forums can serve as spaces where former international students share their experiences with broader audiences. For example, Students from UESTC organized overseas students to visit the “Perceiving China” practice base, as well as the School of Public Administration’s “Governance of China” rural revitalization social practice and cultural experience base in Hongya, Meishan, to carry out the “China in Tea Culture” national education activity. They walked into the green mountains and clear waters, using tea as a medium to experience agricultural civilization through labor practice, feel the spirit of craftsmanship in the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, and deepen friendship through cultural exchange (School of Public Administration, UESTC, 2026).

Such platforms enable the formation of transnational emotional communities. By sharing personal stories, photographs, and reflections, participants collectively construct narratives about their experiences in China.

Cultivating Cultural Narrative Competence

Effective cultural communication requires the ability to articulate experiences in compelling ways. Universities should provide training programs that enhance the cultural narrative competence of international students. Workshops on storytelling, intercultural communication, and digital media production could help students develop these skills. Equipped with such abilities, international students may become more effective

communicators of Chinese cultural experiences.

Domestic universities have actively implemented programs to cultivate such competence. For example, UESTC organizes annual cultural immersion workshops for international students, combining traditional calligraphy, Chinese painting, and tea ceremony practices with guided discussions on the underlying cultural meanings. These initiatives demonstrate that cultural narrative competence emerges through a combination of direct cultural experience and reflective practice, enabling students to transform personal encounters into communicable cultural stories.

In conclusion, cultivating cultural narrative competence among international students is essential for effective cultural transmission. Through structured university programs, experiential learning, and reflective storytelling, students develop the ability to translate their affective engagement with Chinese culture into narratives that both embody local values and are accessible to global audiences. This process not only strengthens students' cross-cultural understanding but also positions them as key actors in China's international cultural communication strategies.

Establishing Transnational Communication Networks

Finally, policymakers should support the creation of global networks connecting international students who have studied in China. Alumni associations, cultural exchange organizations, and collaborative research programs can strengthen long-term relationships. For example, the School of Economics and Management in UESTC has established its first school-level overseas alumni association, aiming to build it into a solid platform for connecting emotions, sharing development, and condensing values, thereby promoting the accelerated, distinctive, and high-quality development of the school (Office of International Cooperation and Exchange, UESTC, 2026).

Through these networks, shared emotional experiences contribute to the formation of transnational emotional communities, who share emotional narratives related to their experiences in China. Such narratives reinforce collective emotional attachments and contribute to the gradual formation of a transnational emotional community. Such networks function as infrastructures for transnational communication. Through them, shared emotional experiences continue to circulate across borders.

Conclusion

As China's global presence continues to expand, the challenge of effective international communication becomes increasingly important. Traditional approaches to international communication have often focused on institutional messaging and information dissemination. However, these strategies sometimes overlook the crucial role of emotional resonance in cross-cultural communication.

Emotional value has become a key variable in determining whether cultural symbols can penetrate the psychological barriers of audiences in foreign cultural contexts (Li, 2025, pp. 84-93). Based on the theoretical framework proposed by Tonnes and Rosenwein, this article has argued that international students in China represent a valuable resource for addressing this challenge. Drawing on theories of emotional communities the study highlights how international students can facilitate emotional connections between Chinese culture and global audiences.

Through their lived experiences in Chinese society, international students acquaint themselves with Chinese emotional norms and cultural practices. Their personal narratives possess credibility and authenticity that

resonate with foreign audiences. Moreover, their cross-cultural emotional competence enables them to function as bridges between different emotional communities.

By serving as experiential witnesses, emotional bridges, emotional mediators, and cultural translators, international students contribute to the formation of transnational emotional networks. These networks play an increasingly important role in shaping global perceptions of Chinese culture.

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