

# **Marginality and Integration in Cross-Cultural Classrooms: A Sociological Analysis of the Learning Experiences of International Students in China - From the Perspective of Discourse, Mobility, and Identity Negotiation in the Context of Educational Internationalization**

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## **Abstract:**

Against the backdrop of the continuous deepening of the internationalization of global higher education, China has rapidly emerged as a key destination for international students. However, there remains widespread debate regarding whether the learning experiences of international students in China truly embody the core spirit of an “internationalized classroom”. Based on a sociological perspective, this paper employs Bourdieu’s capital theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the learning experiences, cultural interactions, and identity negotiation processes of international students in China. The study points out that within the institutional framework of educational internationalization, international students often find themselves caught in the tension between “symbolic inclusion” and “structural exclusion”: they are constructed as the “other” in terms of language, teaching methods, and classroom interactions, and their learning experiences are institutionally marginalized. By analyzing texts from social media and educational policy discourses, this paper reveals the cultural power logic and the mechanism of symbolic capital reproduction in the process of the internationalization of higher education in China. The study argues that international students achieve identity negotiation through the transformation of cultural capital and discourse strategies, which reflects the agency and resistance of individuals in the field of cross-cultural education. This paper calls for “pluralistic dialogue” and “cultural equality” to be taken as the core orientations of internationalized education in both policy-making

and teaching practice, so as to promote cross-cultural classrooms to move from symbolic inclusion to genuine integration.

**Keywords:** Cross-Cultural Education, International Students, Educational Internationalization, Symbolic Capital

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, with the continuous advancement of the “Belt and Road” Initiative and the “Study in China Program”, China has become the world’s fourth-largest host country for international students. According to data from the Ministry of Education, the total number of international students studying in China exceeded 500,000 in 2023, covering regions such as Asia, Africa, and Europe. Nevertheless, the influx of international students does not automatically lead to the true realization of educational internationalization. As Marginson (2019) pointed out, educational internationalization should not be merely understood as a “quantitative indicator of student mobility”, but rather as a process of knowledge and cultural exchange based on mutual benefit and equality.

However, in the actual teaching field, international students often face issues such as language barriers, differences in teaching methods, and cultural isolation. Their learning experiences are framed in institutional discourses as objects of “cultural adaptation” rather than subjects of “knowledge co-construction”. Classroom “internationalization” often remains at the level of form and labeling, concealing the unequal structure in the teaching process. In this process, teachers simultaneously play the dual roles of knowledge disseminators and cultural gatekeepers, and their teaching discourse serves as a medium for the reproduction of power.

Therefore, this paper aims to address the following questions: 1.1 To what extent have the “internationalized classrooms” in Chinese universities achieved cultural integration and equal dialogue? 1.2 How do international students negotiate their learning identities and cultural positions within discourse and institutional structures? 1.3 How do educational internationalization discourses shape the marginal experiences and cultural representations of international students?

This paper intends to reveal the hidden structural inequalities in international educational practice from a sociolog-

ical perspective and put forward teaching strategies and policy recommendations to promote cross-cultural integration.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Sociological Perspectives on Educational Internationalization

As a crucial trend in the development of global higher education, educational internationalization is generally regarded as a symbol of the global flow of knowledge (Knight, 2015). However, the academic community has gradually come to recognize that internationalization is not a neutral process but is embedded in a social structure involving power, capital, and cultural reproduction (Altbach & Knight, 2007). From a sociological perspective, international students are not only participants in educational mobility but also manifestations of power relations in the “global educational field” (Marginson, 2020).

In the Chinese context, educational internationalization holds dual significance: on one hand, it is regarded as a symbol of national soft power and global influence; on the other hand, it also exposes the tension of “institutional exclusivity” within the teaching system (Yang, 2021). Relevant studies have pointed out that although the number of international students is constantly increasing, they are often marginalized in classroom participation, academic discourse, and campus culture (Guo & Chase, 2019).

### 2.2 Bourdieu’s Capital Theory: Field, Habitus, and Symbolic Power

Bourdieu’s (1986) “capital - field - habitus” framework provides a theoretical basis for analyzing the status of international students in cross-cultural classrooms.

- Field refers to a social space filled with competition and power relations, and education is a typical field.
- Cultural Capital determines an individual’s discourse

ability and the way of accessing resources in the field.

- Symbolic Capital realizes the reproduction of power through the legalization mechanism of language and culture.

In internationalized classrooms, teachers often possess mainstream cultural capital (such as proficiency in Chinese, academic authority, and teaching dominance), while international students lack this “recognized form of culture”, resulting in their passivity in discourse (Bourdieu, 1991). At the same time, their original cultural capital is “devalued” in the new field, leading to identity fragmentation and re-adaptation.

### 2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Educational Discourse

Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992) focuses on how language constructs social relations and power structures. In the field of education, CDA reveals the “hidden exclusivity” in classroom language and policy documents. For example, the “inclusive language” used by teachers in classrooms is often based on “cultural centralism” in essence, which strengthens the “other” identity of international students (Shin & Kubota, 2020).

This paper will combine Bourdieu’s capital theory with the CDA framework, starting from the relationship among “discourse - power - identity”, to analyze how international students in China are shaped by educational discourses, positioned by field structures, and how they achieve identity negotiation through cultural strategies.

## 3. Research Design and Methods

### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, combining text analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methods to focus on the classroom experiences and cultural identity negotiation of international students in China. Considering the social constructiveness of educational internationalization and cross-cultural teaching, this study does not pursue generalization in a statistical sense but aims to reveal the social logic behind institutional and discourse structures.

The study employs a multi-source approach, with the main data sources including:

#### 3.1.1 Text analysis of social media and educational platforms:

Comments, discussions, and reflections on the learning experiences in China by international students were selected from Weibo, Zhihu, Douban, and English educational forums (such as the Chi-

na section of The PIE News), covering approximately 120 posts from 2019 to 2024.

#### 3.1.2 Analysis of university policies and teaching documents:

Official documents and promotional texts on “educational internationalization” and “Sino-foreign cooperative education” were collected from the Ministry of Education of China and some key universities (such as Peking University, Fudan University, Tongji University, and East China Normal University).

#### 3.1.3 In-depth interview data (secondary sources):

Interview excerpts from existing studies (e.g., Zhang, 2022; Guo & Chase, 2019) were referred to supplement the understanding of the actual classroom context.

The comprehensive analysis of these data enables the study to present the marginal and integration experiences of international students from multiple dimensions.

## 3.2 Research Methods

### 3.2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Analysis was conducted using Fairclough’s (1992) three-level framework (text level - discursive practice level - social practice level):

- Text level: Analyze how language use, titles, and metaphors (such as “integration”, “adaptation”, and “international friends”) construct the identity of international students;
- Discursive practice level: Examine the reproduction process of these texts in educational policies and university promotions;
- Social practice level: Reveal the underlying cultural power and symbolic capital logic.

### 3.2.2 Theoretical Coding and Thematic Induction

Open coding and axial coding methods were used to conduct thematic analysis on social media texts and policy discourses, and three core themes were extracted: (1) “Language and Power”: The embodiment of language ability as symbolic capital; (2) “Institution and Marginality”: The exclusivity of international students in institutional structures; (3) “Identity and Negotiation”: Students’ realization of agency through the transformation of cultural capital and community strategies.

### 3.2.3 Research Ethics

All data sources are public online texts or public documents, without involving private information. When citing corpora, the personal identities were anonymized to ensure compliance with research ethics.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1 Language, Discourse, and Symbolic Capital: The Invisible Structure of Power

Language is not only a tool for communication but also a symbol of power and status (Bourdieu, 1991). In the internationalized classrooms of Chinese universities, language serves as an important carrier of cultural capital. Many international students remain passively silent in courses taught in Chinese due to language barriers, and their attempts to speak are often misinterpreted by teachers as “lack of initiative”. However, as a Nigerian student wrote on Zhihu: “It’s not that I don’t want to speak; I’m just afraid of being laughed at for my grammatical mistakes.” This language anxiety reflects the asymmetry of symbolic power.

Teachers hold the dominant power of discourse in the classroom, and the academic language and evaluation system they use embody mainstream cultural capital. For example, evaluation criteria such as “clear expression” and “strong logicality” in the classroom actually imply a legalized form of specific language and culture (Fairclough, 1992). In this structure, international students often can only be “evaluated” and hardly become “evaluators”.

Meanwhile, although English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses have to a certain extent increased the participation of international students, they have also formed new symbolic boundaries - some Chinese students believe that “EMI courses are designed for foreigners”, while international students are excluded from group interactions due to cultural gaps. This “symbolic inclusion” has instead concealed the real language inequality in educational internationalization.

### 4.2 The Dual Tension between Institution and Culture: From “Policy Discourse” to “Classroom Practice”

In the promotional texts of the Ministry of Education and universities, “internationalization” is often described as a strategy to enhance “national competitiveness” and “educational image”. However, this macro-discourse often treats international students as “objects”, measuring the achievements of educational internationalization by quantitative indicators while ignoring their real learning experiences.

In the policy context, “international student education” is tied to national image and diplomatic relations, and its educational significance is “functionalized”. This “insti-

tutional symbolic capital” makes international students a symbol of “showcasing diversity” rather than partners in “equal knowledge co-construction”.

For instance, a university promotional report states: “International students from 72 countries in our university have promoted multicultural exchanges.” Nevertheless, in terms of teaching practice, the low participation of international students and limited course interactions are still common phenomena. This indicates a disconnect between “internationalization” at the institutional level and “integration” at the classroom level. Bourdieu’s concept of “field” reveals the root cause of this disconnect: the power logic of the educational field determines whose culture is recognized and whose experiences are silenced.

### 4.3 Identity Negotiation and the Transformation of Cultural Capital: From Marginality to Agency

Despite being in a structurally unequal situation, international students are not completely passive “recipients”. Through strategic practices, they seek recognition and visibility in the gap between different cultures and languages. Some students accumulate new symbolic capital and realize the “re-transformation” of cultural capital by improving their Chinese proficiency, participating in on-campus club activities, or serving as “cultural ambassadors” (Bourdieu, 1986). Others form transnational support networks through online communities (such as WeChat groups and forums) to rebuild a sense of belonging and cultural identity in informal spaces.

This “negotiated identity” reflects the agency of individuals in the cross-cultural field. As a graduate student from Thailand wrote on Weibo: “Here, I am not just an ‘international student’; I am also a teacher, a classmate, and a researcher.” - This self-narration is precisely the process of identity reproduction.

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, this kind of self-expression is a form of “re-discursivation” of mainstream discourse, that is, breaking through the context of being “othered” by redefining one’s own role and realizing the return of cultural subjectivity.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

### 5.1 Research Conclusions

From the comprehensive perspective of Bourdieu’s capital theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper reveals the social structural characteristics and cultural tensions in

the learning experiences of international students in China. The research shows that: 5.1.1 Language is the most explicit symbolic capital in the educational field. The use of Chinese or English not only determines the level of students' classroom participation but also represents a distribution mechanism of discourse power. Unintentionally, through the process of language standardization, teachers and institutions place international students in a hidden position of "incompetence" or "cultural discomfort". 5.1.2 There is a duality of "symbolic inclusion and structural exclusion" in the discourse of internationalization policies. Universities and policy documents emphasize multiculturalism in form, but in practice, classroom teaching, curriculum design, and evaluation systems still center on local students and local culture. International students are included in the category of "demonstrative diversity" rather than being subjects of "substantive participation". 5.1.3 International students demonstrate agency in the transformation of cultural capital and identity negotiation. Through language learning, cross-cultural communication, community support, and self-discourse construction, they actively reshape their positions in the educational field. This process not only reflects strategic actions under structural constraints but also reveals the potential social change momentum in the educational field.

In conclusion, educational internationalization in the Chinese context presents dual characteristics: on the one hand, it promotes the flow of knowledge and cultural exchanges; on the other hand, it also exposes the reproduction of inequalities at the institutional and cultural levels. In this process, international students are not only witnesses of educational globalization but also bearers of its contradictory structure.

## 5.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

### 5.2.1 Theoretical Implications: Expanding the Sociological Interpretation of Educational Internationalization

The findings of this study indicate that educational internationalization should not be merely understood as a policy or economic phenomenon but as a social practice embedded in power relations. The combination of Bourdieu's "field - capital - habitus" framework and Critical Discourse Analysis provides a new analytical path for understanding the cultural marginalization and identity negotiation of international students. Research on educational internationalization needs to go beyond the functionalist perspective and pay attention to the political nature of

knowledge production and the structural bias of discourse.

### 5.2.2 Practical Implications: Promoting the Transformation of Classrooms from "Inclusiveness" to "Dialogue"

Universities should strengthen cross-cultural sensitivity in curriculum design and teacher training, avoid treating international students as "objects of adaptation", and instead encourage them to participate in teaching interactions as "members of the knowledge community". In the classroom, teachers need to be aware of their role as symbolic capital holders and achieve genuine cultural integration through open teaching strategies (such as collaborative learning, multilingual teaching support, and culturally reflective dialogue).

### 5.2.3 Policy Implications: Reconstructing the Evaluation Logic of Educational Internationalization

Current educational internationalization policies overly rely on quantitative indicators (such as the number of international students and the number of international cooperation projects) while neglecting the quality of students' experiences and classroom interactions. Future policies should shift to an evaluation system centered on "participation quality", "cultural equity", and "teaching diversity" to ensure that internationalization is not merely the export of institutions but also the deepening of cultural understanding.

## 5.3 Research Limitations and Future Prospects

This study is mainly based on the analysis of texts and secondary data and lacks the support of on-site observation and in-depth interview data. Future research can use ethnographic methods to conduct in-depth studies in the classroom setting, exploring the real-time negotiation and cultural reconstruction processes between teachers and international students in teaching interactions. At the same time, it is also necessary to pay attention to the unique situations of student groups from non-English-speaking countries, such as students from countries along the "Belt and Road", whose language capital and cultural backgrounds may affect their educational adaptation models. In addition, future research can further compare the differences in internationalized teaching among different universities and different discipline types (such as science and engineering versus humanities and social sciences) to reveal the diversity and complexity of the capital structure in the educational field.



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