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*Journal of International Students*  
Volume 16, Issue 17 (2026), pp. 73-96  
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)  
jistudents.org  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/4a8eew73>



## **Bridging the Gap Between Legal Understanding and Legal Trust: International Students' Identification with Chinese Legal Culture**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This mixed method study investigates international students' identification with Chinese legal culture using a "Three-Dimensional Integrated Model of Cross-Legal Cultural Adaptation" encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. The findings reveal a significant "structural misalignment" in legal identity. While students demonstrate high levels of cognitive value appreciation, they lag in terms of institutional (affective) and practical (behavioral) trust. Regression analysis indicates that negative institutional interactions and inaccessible legal channels drive this misalignment. This paper proposes targeted "empowerment pathways" to bridge the gap between theoretical cognition and practical application, offering insights to optimize international student legal education and to inform global governance.*

**Keywords:** cross-cultural adaptation, international students, legal-cultural identity, structural misalignment, theoretical framework

**Received:** Feb 3, 2026 | **Revised:** June 9, 2026 | **Accepted:** July 1, 2026

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## INTRODUCTION

Driven by the internationalization of higher education, transnational student mobility has evolved into a global phenomenon of immense scale and complexity. This massive migration represents not only a transnational allocation of educational resources but also a significant intersection of diverse legal cultures and individual identities. As student populations expand, issues initially manifesting as internal adaptability problems have increasingly externalized into legal frictions. The frequent occurrence of legal cases and social incidents involving international students in recent years is not a series of isolated accidents. Rather, it is a concentrated manifestation of the legal tensions inherent in this macrotransformation, bringing challenges regarding social equity and host-country governance into sharp focus.

Consequently, a severe reality currently persists in the global education sector: international students frequently fall into distress or unintentionally violate host country laws because of a deep estrangement from the host country's legal culture. Crucially, such predicaments are rarely rooted in malicious intent. Instead, they stem from a deeper level of legal-cultural cognitive dissonance—students are not only unfamiliar with complex statutes but also struggle to comprehend the underlying social values and enforcement logic that govern them.

Cultivating a robust cross-cultural legal identity is therefore of multilayered importance, extending from individual well-being to social integration. At the individual level, a successful legal-cultural identity serves as the cornerstone of student empowerment. While international students universally face academic and social pressures that can lead to isolation (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015), language barriers and opaque administrative procedures further exacerbate their sense of powerlessness and alienation. A sound legal identity transforms international students from passive recipients of rules to active defenders of their rights, enabling them to cope with discrimination (Lee, 2007) and efficiently handle practical issues such as visas and accommodations, thereby safeguarding their academic progress. This impact subsequently extends to the social and institutional levels. If the international student community remains marginalized from the legal culture, it not only risks triggering social conflicts due to misunderstandings but also solidifies its status as an “outsider,” causing it to miss valuable opportunities for genuine cross-cultural engagement.

At the macro level of global governance, the legal cultural identity of international students constitutes a microfoundation of “global administrative law” practices (Kingsbury, Krisch, & Stewart, 2005). In a highly mobile transnational space, procedural guarantees and the legal integration of noncitizens serve as critical benchmarks for measuring the maturity of a nation's rule of law. Therefore, fostering international students' legal identity is not only a responsibility toward the individual but also an intrinsic requirement for host countries participating in the construction of a fairer, rules-based global governance order.

The challenges of legal-cultural adaptation are particularly salient in the Chinese context. Owing to China's rapid economic development, increasing

international influence, and preferential government policies, the number of inbound international students demonstrated a sustained and rapid growth trend, peaking in 2018 at 492,185 students from 196 countries studying in 1,004 higher education institutions across China (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2019). Notably, the proportion of degree-seeking students has continued to rise, increasing from 40.7% in 2012 to 52.44% in 2018. This shift indicates that the appeal of "Studying in China" is transitioning from short-term language training to higher-quality degree education (Fang & Wu, 2016). In early 2020, the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented shock to international personnel mobility (Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2021). Owing to strict entry–exit management and travel restrictions, the number of inbound international students sharply decreased. However, as China optimized and adjusted its epidemic control policies in early 2023 to resume international exchanges, education for inbound students began a recovery phase. According to the Blue Book: Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad (2023–2024) released by the Center for China and Globalization (CCG, 2023), with the restoration of offline instruction, Chinese universities have intensified their recruitment efforts, and the number of inbound students clearly rebounds. This resurgence exacerbated deep-seated issues that existed prior to the pandemic, such as cross-cultural adaptation and legal protection, thereby placing new demands on the governance capabilities of Chinese universities (An & Chiang, 2015; Li, 2015).

The rapid expansion and increasingly complex composition of the inbound international student body have posed unprecedented challenges to China's current legal and governance systems. The most conspicuous level of this challenge involves cases of criminal offenses. Indeed, such incidents reveal deeper problems beyond individual misconduct. An empirical study of 114 criminal cases involving international students in China between 2012 and 2021 revealed that drug crimes were the primary type, accounting for 37.72% of criminal cases (Qiu & Luo, 2012). This reflects not only individual choices but also a conflict of transnational legal culture. The lenient control of drugs in some students' home countries creates a cognitive bias regarding China's strict anti-drug laws, highlighting the critical importance of conducting preemptive rule-of-law education.

Therefore, to effectively increase students' sense of identification with the host country's legal culture, it is essential to deconstruct the system of influences shaping their cross-legal cultural identity and propose improved pathways for its cultivation. Ultimately, such an approach aims to reduce the likelihood of illegal behavior and the associated public security and judicial costs, while promoting mutual learning and the development of legal culture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Research on International Student Management and Legal Issues*

The international student community represents vital intellectual capital and economic resources and plays a crucial role in promoting campus diversity and academic exchange (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). However, beyond mere cross-cultural adaptation, these students must navigate and fulfill obligations within a complex legal and administrative system. Upon entering the host country, they immediately find themselves at the intersection of a dual management system governed by both the university and the state.

First, the university management system profoundly shapes students' cross-legal cultural experiences. Disparities in educational norms frequently trigger conflicts in management models. For instance, a reluctance to publicly challenge a teacher's authority may be misinterpreted in Western classrooms as a lack of initiative; similarly, cultural differences regarding "academic norms" mean that actions considered respectful in one's home country might be deemed academic misconduct abroad (McIntire & Willer, 1992). Furthermore, administrative support often involves "cultural blind spots". A study on Scandinavian universities revealed that when virtual learning environments (VLEs) are deeply embedded in local culture and provide materials solely in the local language, they create immense adaptation barriers for international students (Habib, Johannesen, & Øgrim, 2014). Finally, student services often prioritize visa compliance over psychological counseling (Zhai, 2002), resulting in students being isolated and struggling to establish deep social connections (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016).

Second, the legal framework of immigration constitutes a fundamental constraint on international students. Strict regulations effectively turn universities into extensions of law enforcement, placing students in a vulnerable and insecure legal position (McIntire & Willer, 1992). In the realm of public administration, students directly confront the "administrative culture" of the host country. Research has indicated that international students often feel overwhelmed when facing bureaucracy and opaque procedures (Miežanskienė & Tartilaitė-Paulauskienė, 2020). When administrative systems default to serve native citizens, language barriers and established workflows naturally marginalize outsiders. More profoundly, these obstacles can evolve into systemic discrimination or "neracism," where administrative measures frequently become tools that exacerbate inequality (Lee, 2007).

Finally, from the perspective of "global administrative law" (GAL), globalization has spawned a "global administrative space" that transcends national borders (Kingsbury, Krisch, & Stewart, 2005). International students situated within this space are simultaneously subject to their home country's laws, the host country's immigration rules, and university regulations. The challenges they face precisely highlight a core pain point in global governance: the absence of administrative accountability mechanisms (Kingsbury, Krisch, & Stewart, 2005). Therefore, the predicament of international students is not only an issue of individual adaptation but also a microcosm of imperfect global governance.

mechanisms. This structurally places them in a vulnerable position, profoundly restricting their subsequent trust in and integration into the host country's legal system.

***Research on the Path of Cross-Legal Cultural Identity among International Students***

Driven by the dual forces of educational internationalization and economic globalization, the cross-legal cultural identity of international students emerges as a composite concept spanning jurisprudence and sociology (Campos et al., 2021). Here, law is not an isolated system of rules but a product deeply rooted in specific cultural soil (Burgess, 1997). The modernization process may lead to a divorce between legal jurisdiction and its cultural foundations, causing a disconnect between law and its cultural roots—a phenomenon concentratedly manifested in the cross-cultural experience of international students. Their identity is, in itself, a multidimensional, fluid, and emergent complex system (Hobsbawm, 1996). This implies that the formation of their legal-cultural identity is not a simple binary choice between “motherland culture” and “host culture” but rather a dynamic process of negotiation and reshaping conducted as a “nondominant community” (Barzilai, 2010) interacting with the host country's dominant legal culture.

This identity system presents a multilayered structure extending from the exterior to the interior: the surface layer is “material legal-cultural identity”, which recognizes the common legal needs generated by specific modes of production; the middle layer is “institutional legal-cultural identity”, serving as a bridge between the material and the spiritual, reflecting the acceptance of legal norms and organizational forms; and the deepest and core layer is “spiritual legal-cultural identity”, encompassing legal psychology, concepts, and ideologies (Bai, 2007). To systematically operationalize this multilayered process for empirical investigation, this study synthesizes these perspectives to construct a “Three-Dimensional Integrated Model” as its core analytical framework. This model deconstructs legal-cultural identity into three distinct but interconnected dimensions: “cognitive,” “affective,” and “behavioral”.

Therefore, the core objective of cultivating international students' legal-cultural identity is not to force cultural assimilation but to promote an “additive identity”. This means that students need not discard their original cultural identity but should, on that basis, cognitively integrate their understanding and experience of the host country's legal culture into themselves (Gao, 2026), often catalyzed by a “state of discomfort” (Liu & Rathbone, 2021). This construction is a multilevel progressive process. It begins by establishing an “emotional identity” based on trust, which serves as the affective foundation. It then evolves into a “value identity” through the cognition of universal values. Finally, it culminates in a “behavioral identity”, achieved by actively utilizing the law to safeguard rights in daily life (Gong, 2014), a progression that aligns with the three dimensions of our proposed framework.

The final stage of legal-cultural identity marks the international student's transformation from a passive observer of legal rules to an understander of the host country's rule-of-law values and, eventually, an active disseminator. The stability of a nation's legal system relies not only on comprehensive norms but also on the law-abiding consciousness of its people and a stable social environment (Zhang & Huang, 2017). For international students, if they can personally experience scientific legislation, strict law enforcement, and impartial justice, this positive "behavioral identity" will significantly consolidate the foundations of their affective and behavioral identities.

### ***International Students' Experiences in China***

When international students with diverse multicultural backgrounds engage in legal education and practice in China, their native legal-cultural genes inevitably collide with Chinese legal culture, triggering a series of practical dilemmas. The root of this collision lies in deep-seated cultural differences (Zhu, 2023). Students often enter China with preconceptions or stereotypes about their home country's legal system. The significant disparities between the two nations regarding legal traditions, procedural justice, and concepts of rights immediately trigger an internal cognitive conflict. Faced with this conflict, some students manage to create a "mediated space" through negotiation and interaction with Chinese culture to achieve reconciliation (Li, 2015).

However, in the affective dimension, more students feel isolated and confused because of maladaptation, developing an "outsider" mentality (Jibreel, 2015). This psychological alienation is exacerbated by practical challenges such as interpersonal difficulties and academic pressure (Yang, 2005), potentially leading them to form a "comfort zone" that remains detached from mainstream Chinese society in personal, emotional, and institutional dimensions. They maintain minimal contact with their surrounding social life (Xu, Mai, & Liao, 2023), eventually evolving into emotional resistance and low levels of trust in Chinese law.

This profound alienation inevitably translates into behavioral passivity and estrangement, characterized by a low participation rate in legal practice. Owing to language barriers, information asymmetry, and unfamiliarity with judicial procedures, international students rarely actively seek legal remedies when they encounter disputes. Deep down, there exists a belief that even resorting to the law would not yield fair treatment. Consequently, they view the law as "rules meant for others" rather than as effective tools for protecting their own rights. This predicament profoundly reflects the tension between the law and the legal subject: the legal system demands a stable, unified image of the "legal subject", whereas the identity of international students is a "postmodern identity". A deep internal contradiction exists between the two (Wicke, 1991). This incompatibility of identity makes it difficult for them to find their place when facing the seemingly unified and dominant Chinese legal system, leading them to choose avoidance and retreat in their behavior.

In the context of globalization, building the legal-cultural identity of international students is not unidirectional cultural indoctrination but a dynamic and interactive cultivation process. The pathway begins with basic compliance with Chinese laws, regulations, and university rules, which serve as the foundation for adapting to the new environment and achieving convergent management (Xu et al., 2024). However, higher-level identification is a progressive process moving from passive rule compliance to the active understanding and acceptance of the underlying rule-of-law values. In this process, the concepts inherent in excellent traditional Chinese legal culture can serve as unique cultural resources. These resources support the psychological foundation for identifying with the contemporary rule-of-law society (Hei, 2023), helping international students understand the uniqueness of Chinese rule of law from a cultural dimension. Successful cultivation of rule-of-law identity transforms students from cultural “adapters” into “promoters” of cross-cultural communication. After profoundly understanding the rationality and distinctiveness of the path of socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics, they become important bridges for telling the true, multidimensional, and comprehensive story of China’s rule of law to the world (Qin et al., 2023).

## **METHOD**

This study primarily examines the extent of identification with Chinese legal culture among international students. This study aims to provide insights into how Chinese universities can deliver legal dissemination education to international students and enhance their cross-legal cultural identity. It seeks to address three core questions:

- (1) At what level does identification with Chinese legal culture stand among international students, and what structural characteristics does it exhibit?
- (2) Which key demographic variables and factors regarding their experience in China significantly influence their legal-cultural identity?
- (3) How can the cross-legal cultural identity of international students be improved?

To systematically address these questions, the theoretical perspectives outlined in the literature review—specifically the three-dimensional integrated model—directly inform this study’s research hypotheses. Based on this framework, we explicitly propose the following hypotheses:

H1: A “structural misalignment” exists within international students’ legal-cultural identity, characterized by significantly higher scores in the cognitive dimension than in the affective and behavioral dimensions.

H2: Positive evaluations of institutional interactions significantly and positively predict the affective dimension of identity.

H3: The perceived accessibility of formal legal channels is a significant positive predictor of the behavioral dimension.

### ***Research Design and Measures***

To test these hypotheses and ensure methodological rigor, this study adopted a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research. This approach leverages large-scale surveys to reveal common characteristics and influencing factors, while using in-depth interviews to capture subjective individual experiences, thereby yielding a profound and comprehensive empirical analysis.

With respect to the quantitative design, drawing upon the relevant literature on the mechanisms of legal–cultural identity and adapting the emotion–behavior structure of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), this project constructed a scientific and innovative four-level hierarchical questionnaire indicator system. The overarching concept of “legal-cultural identity” was operationalized into three secondary dimensions: “legal-cultural cognition,” “subjective legal attitude,” and “objective legal behavior” (aligning with our proposed three-dimensional model). These were further decomposed into 17 tertiary measurement indicators (such as “legal knowledge reserve” and “institutional trust”), which were reflected through specific survey questions. All quantitative data were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, and the validity of the indicators was assessed using structural equation modeling (SEM), thereby significantly enhancing scientific rigor.

### ***Sampling and Participants***

The project optimized the questionnaire through a small-scale pilot survey to gather feedback before wide distribution. A total of 320 questionnaires were distributed, and 307 valid responses were recovered, yielding a highly effective response rate of 95.9%. The quantitative sample ensured broad diversity and representativeness, covering international students from 53 countries across 23 academic majors.

### ***Qualitative Interviews***

To complement the quantitative data, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 international students from diverse backgrounds. These interviews were systematically structured around the three major themes of the theoretical framework: “legal–cultural cognition,” “subjective legal attitudes,” and “objective legal behaviors.” This qualitative component provided a crucial context regarding the actual obstacles students face when they interact with the host country’s legal and administrative systems.

### ***Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations***

Quantitative data were analyzed using multiple linear regression models to explore the relationships between independent variables (specific experiences) and the dependent variable (overall legal–cultural identity). The qualitative interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis. Furthermore, this study

was conducted with strict adherence to ethical guidelines; informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the survey and interviews, and all identifiable personal data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Demographic Profile of the Respondents***

A total of 307 international students participated in this study. The sample was predominantly male ( $n=197$ , 64.2%), with females accounting for 35.8% ( $n=110$ ). The oldest age group was 16–22 years ( $n=127$ , 41.4%), followed by 23–26 ( $n=100$ , 32.6%), 27–35 ( $n=75$ , 24.4%), and over 35 ( $n=5$ , 1.6%). The majority were pursuing a Bachelor's degree ( $n=183$ , 59.6%), followed by Master's ( $n=97$ , 31.6%) and Doctoral degrees ( $n=27$ , 8.8%). Chinese proficiency levels varied, with the largest cohort holding an HSK 4–6 certificate ( $n=113$ , 36.8%). The duration of stay was relatively balanced: 1–3 years (36.5%), less than one year (34.2%), and more than three years (29.3%). Before arriving in China, 75.2% ( $n=231$ ) of the students already considered it to be a rule of law country. Social networks were the most cited source for understanding Chinese laws ( $n=121$ , 43.7%).

### ***Testing H1: Descriptive Statistics of Structural Misalignment***

The data clearly reveal a core issue in the legal–cultural identity of international students: a significant gap between subjective importance and experiential satisfaction. To address H1, we examined the mean scores across the cognitive, affective (subjective attitude), and behavioral dimensions.

As shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3, a consistent structural misalignment is evident across all dimensions, supporting H1. The overall mean score for importance assessment was high at 4.01, with 71.61% of the students identifying Chinese legal culture and its related practices as important (individual importance scores  $> 2.5$ ). In stark contrast, the mean score for satisfaction with actual implementation decreased significantly to 3.81, with only 65.79% expressing satisfaction. This discrepancy confirms a persistent gap between theoretical valuation and practical experience.

Specifically, in the Cognitive dimension (Table 1), students assigned high importance to items such as understanding social values ( $M = 3.99$ ), yet their self-performance scores were consistently lower (overall  $M = 3.67$ ). The most prominent contradiction was found in “Diversity of channels to engage with legal culture,” which received a high importance score ( $M = 3.91$ ) but the lowest performance score among all the cognitive items ( $M = 3.55$ ).

In the Attitudinal dimension (Table 2), high importance was placed on a safe legal environment ( $M = 4.20$ ), but the actual satisfaction scores lagged (overall  $M = 3.92$ ). The largest expectation gap was observed in “trust in Chinese law enforcement agencies and judicial authorities” (a gap of 0.26 points). Notably, the

item “Identify as a member of China’s legal community” received the lowest scores for both importance (M = 3.89) and performance (M = 3.71).

In the behavioral dimension (Table 3), while students highly valued strict compliance (M = 4.04), their actual initiative to actively introduce legal culture decreased sharply to a performance score of 3.74, forming the widest gap (0.28 points) among all the behavioral items.

**Table 1: Mean Scores of International Students’ Understanding of Chinese Legal Culture and Satisfaction with Chinese Legal Services in Legal-Cultural Cognition Dimensions**

|                                                                                                          | Mean<br>(Importance) | Mean<br>(Performance) | SD<br>(Importance) | SD<br>(Performance) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Understanding of the core concepts of traditional Chinese legal culture                                  | 3.80                 | 3.72                  | 1.288              | 1.158               |
| Proficiency in the basics of China’s current legal system                                                | 3.79                 | 3.58                  | 1.260              | 1.266               |
| Understanding of the social values behind Chinese legal rules                                            | 3.99                 | 3.75                  | 1.215              | 1.152               |
| Diversity of channels to engage with China’s legal culture through multiple channels                     | 3.91                 | 3.55                  | 1.204              | 1.225               |
| Avoid sensitivity to misinterpretation of Chinese legal culture based on individual cases or stereotypes | 4.02                 | 3.75                  | 1.163              | 1.158               |

**Table 2: Mean Scores of International Students' Understanding of Chinese Legal Culture and Satisfaction with Chinese Legal Services in Subjective Legal Attitudes Dimensions**

|                                                                                                         | Mean<br>(Importance) | Mean<br>(Performance) | SD<br>(Importance) | SD<br>(Performance) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Resonation with the concepts of "fairness" and "justice" in Chinese legal culture                       | 4.06                 | 3.83                  | 1.160              | 1.185               |
| Satisfaction with the protection of legal rights and interests in daily life in China                   | 4.11                 | 3.95                  | 1.189              | 1.193               |
| Evaluation of the effectiveness of awareness campaigns against serious crimes like drug abuse and fraud | 4.20                 | 4.02                  | 1.174              | 1.238               |
| Satisfaction with the clarity and implementation of China's visa and residence permit policies          | 4.07                 | 3.94                  | 1.226              | 1.243               |
| Evaluation of the education and enforcement regarding                                                   | 4.08                 | 3.97                  | 1.176              | 1.160               |

|                                                                               |      |      |       |       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|-------|-------|
| China's traffic regulations                                                   |      |      |       |       |
| Trust in Chinese law enforcement agencies and judicial authorities            | 4.17 | 3.91 | 1.140 | 1.254 |
| Evaluation of the practical effect of Chinese law in maintaining social order | 4.13 | 3.91 | 1.207 | 1.210 |
| Identify as a member of China's "legal community" in a cross-cultural context | 3.89 | 3.71 | 1.195 | 1.238 |

**Table 3: Mean Scores of International Students' Understanding of Chinese Legal Culture and Satisfaction with Chinese Legal Services in Objective Legal Behaviors Dimensions**

|                                                                                       | Mean<br>(Importance) | Mean<br>(Performance) | SD<br>(Importance) | SD<br>(Performance) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| The initiative to participate in legal activities organized by schools or communities | 3.88                 | 3.76                  | 1.303              | 1.192               |
| The initiative to strictly comply with Chinese laws and                               | 4.04                 | 3.94                  | 1.231              | 1.223               |

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|                                                                                              |      |      |       |       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|-------|-------|
| campus regulations                                                                           |      |      |       |       |
| The initiative to prioritize legal channels (over informal negotiations) to resolve disputes | 3.97 | 3.81 | 1.238 | 1.267 |
| The initiative to actively introduce Chinese legal culture                                   | 4.02 | 3.74 | 1.213 | 1.228 |

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### ***Testing H2 and H3: Regression Analysis of Influencing Factors***

To test hypotheses H2 and H3, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted with the “overall level of identification” as the dependent variable and the specific performance items across all dimensions as independent variables (see Table 4). The overall model was highly significant ( $p < .001$ ) and accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in students’ overall identification ( $R^2 = .485$ ). The multiple correlation coefficient ( $R$ ) reached 0.697. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values were within an acceptable range, indicating that no severe multicollinearity issues occurred.

The results support H2, demonstrating that positive institutional interactions predict the affective dimension of identity. Specifically, “Satisfaction with the clarity and implementation of China’s visa and residence permit policies” had a significant positive effect on overall identification ( $\beta = .169$ ,  $p = .007$ ).

Furthermore, the results strongly support H3, confirming that actionable legal channels predict behavioral engagement. The item “The initiative to prioritize legal channels to resolve disputes” emerged as the most significant positive predictor in the model ( $\beta = .256$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Additionally, “the initiative to strictly comply with Chinese laws” presented marginal significance ( $\beta = .140$ ,  $p = .052$ ).

**Table 4: Regression Coefficients Table for the Survey of International Students’ Understanding of Chinese Legal Culture and Satisfaction with Chinese Legal Services**

| Model                                                                                                    | Unstandardized Coefficients |       | Standardized Coefficients | t      |       | p     | Collinearity Statistics |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|---------------------------|--------|-------|-------|-------------------------|-----|
|                                                                                                          | B                           | SE    |                           |        |       |       | Tolerance               | VIF |
| Understanding of the core concepts of traditional Chinese legal culture                                  | -.040                       | 0.048 | -0.052                    | -0.825 | 0.410 | 0.565 | 1.771                   |     |
| Proficiency in the basics of China’s current legal system                                                | 0.035                       | 0.048 | 0.050                     | 0.733  | 0.464 | 0.479 | 2.088                   |     |
| Understanding of the social values behind Chinese legal rules                                            | 0.037                       | 0.048 | 0.048                     | 0.769  | 0.443 | 0.570 | 1.753                   |     |
| Diversity of channels to engage with China’s legal culture through multiple channels                     | 0.019                       | 0.047 | 0.027                     | 0.412  | 0.680 | 0.532 | 1.880                   |     |
| Avoid sensitivity to misinterpretation of Chinese legal culture based on individual cases or stereotypes | 0.027                       | 0.044 | 0.035                     | 0.600  | 0.549 | 0.663 | 1.509                   |     |
| Resonation with the concepts of “fairness” and “justice” in Chinese legal culture                        | 0.015                       | 0.049 | 0.020                     | 0.309  | 0.757 | 0.514 | 1.947                   |     |
| Satisfaction with the protection of legal rights and interests in daily life in China                    | 0.005                       | 0.048 | 0.007                     | 0.109  | 0.914 | 0.519 | 1.925                   |     |
| Evaluation of the effectiveness of awareness campaigns against serious crimes like drug abuse and fraud  | 0.032                       | 0.047 | 0.045                     | 0.687  | 0.492 | 0.524 | 1.908                   |     |
| Satisfaction with the clarity and implementation of China’s visa and residence permit policies           | 0.120                       | 0.044 | 0.169                     | 2.737  | 0.007 | 0.587 | 1.704                   |     |

|                                                                                       |        |       |        |        |       |       |       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
| Evaluation of the education and enforcement regarding China's traffic regulations     | 0.058  | 0.047 | 0.076  | 1.230  | 0.220 | 0.590 | 1.695 |
| Trust in Chinese law enforcement agencies and judicial authorities                    | 0.059  | 0.046 | 0.085  | 1.276  | 0.203 | 0.511 | 1.956 |
| Evaluation of the practical effect of Chinese law in maintaining social order         | -0.032 | 0.050 | -0.044 | -0.641 | 0.522 | 0.480 | 2.085 |
| Identify as a member of China's "legal community" in a cross-cultural context         | 0.055  | 0.049 | 0.077  | 1.109  | 0.269 | 0.466 | 2.144 |
| The initiative to participate in legal activities organized by schools or communities | 0.017  | 0.047 | 0.023  | 0.353  | 0.725 | 0.545 | 1.835 |
| The initiative to strictly comply with Chinese laws and campus regulations            | 0.101  | 0.052 | 0.140  | 1.952  | 0.052 | 0.437 | 2.286 |
| The initiative to prioritize legal channels to resolve disputes                       | 0.178  | 0.048 | 0.256  | 3.707  | 0.001 | 0.471 | 2.123 |
| The initiative to actively introduce Chinese legal culture                            | 0.003  | 0.043 | 0.004  | 0.069  | 0.945 | 0.616 | 1.624 |

## DISCUSSION

### *Deconstructing Structural Misalignment*

This study reveals the internal structure and core tensions associated with international students' identification with Chinese legal culture. Our primary finding confirms H1: a distinct chasm exists between the internal drive of the student community for identification with Chinese legal culture and their actual experiential feelings in China. This gap permeates the entire identification process.

On the cognitive level, international students demonstrate a profound internal contradiction and a unique value orientation in their understanding of Chinese legal culture. They do not merely perceive the law as a set of external rules to be

followed; rather, they show a keen sensitivity to the deep cultural logic underlying it. The data indicate that their highest self-evaluations are in grasping the “social values behind Chinese law” and “traditional cultural concepts”. The regression model further confirms that these two forms of “soft knowledge” are the most potent drivers in predicting their overall identification. This strongly suggests that the foundation of their rule-of-law identity is not built upon the mechanical memorization of legal statutes but stems from an understanding of and resonance with the traditional Chinese cultural spirit (Chen, 2021). This mode of identification prioritizes moral legitimacy and rationality; they are primarily concerned with whether the law is just and reasonable rather than its mere instrumental utility (Jiang, 2018). However, this value-oriented cognitive model also exposes a scarcity of information channels. The data show that “diversity of channels to engage with legal culture” is their lowest-performing item, highlighting that an “insufficient supply” of dissemination pathways is a primary obstacle to deepening their understanding (Zhang, 2024). This lack of continuous education is illustrated by a student from Vietnam, who recalled: *“When I first entered the school, I attended a lecture where the teacher told us a lot about Chinese laws and regulations, listing some things we shouldn't do, but after that, I don't remember having any other related training.”* This sense of alienation, born from inadequate communication channels, not only creates a “gap between knowledge and action” in legal cognition but also fosters a sense of legal “powerlessness,” preventing them from effectively translating their value identification into proactive practice (Zhang, 2020).

On the attitudinal level, international students affirm the instrumental and functional performance of China's legal system. Their appreciation for its stability and predictability forms the basis of their positive attitude. This shift in perception is often a direct result of their lived experiences. As a student from the Democratic Republic of the Congo shared: *“Before coming to China, I had limited understanding of the security situation here, but the sense of safety I experienced firsthand has greatly changed my view of China's social management.”* Similarly, a student from Tanzania noted that *“Chinese people strictly abide by laws and rules; their self-discipline left a deep impression on me,”* while a student from Georgia also highly praised the enforcement, stating that *“the enforcement effectiveness is very good, and people obey the law very much.”* This observation aligns with the arguments of some scholars that the primary objective of the Chinese legal system is order maintenance rather than the pursuit of abstract justice (Clarke, 2022). As direct participants in Chinese society, the security and order that students experience are practical manifestations of this “order maintenance” paradigm. Nevertheless, this functional approval is not without tension. The data reveal the most significant gap in the expectations of law enforcement and judicial authorities, indicating that even in the highly valued function of “order maintenance,” their actual experience falls short of their expectations. This was reflected in some students' perceptions of systemic bias; for instance, a student from Nigeria felt that *“when handling certain matters, Chinese people still tend to favor Chinese people.”* Conversely, other students acknowledged the friendliness of basic administration, with a student from

Tanzania stating: *"I think that whether it is the police, security guards, or dormitory administrators, their attitude toward us and Chinese people is the same, we receive the same treatment as Chinese students."* Despite this friendly treatment, the lack of deeper interaction reinforces their status as "legitimate outsiders." In regard to "identifying as a member of China's 'legal community'," both the importance rating and the performance score decrease to the lowest values among all the items. This clearly delineates their psychological positioning: that of a "legitimate outsider"—integrated into the legal order yet marginalized emotionally and culturally. This sense of identity alienation is the core psychological barrier preventing their legal identity from evolving from superficial, functional acceptance to a profound sense of emotional belonging.

Legal-cultural identity is, at its core, a form of cultural identity that is inseparable from a society's inherent historical traditions and ethical concepts (Yu & Lü, 2016). For international students, the process of constructing this identity is often complicated by their preexisting legal-cultural backgrounds. Chinese law is frequently objectified in their minds as an external system to adapt to, rather than a "legal community", it can integrate into and see as a reflection of its own community values. This inability to internalize external norms hinders the formation of a higher-level legal identity. This dilemma is partly attributable to the challenge of integrating modern rule of law with indigenous resources in China's legal development, which can limit the external appeal and internal identity construction of Chinese legal culture (Tang, 2024).

On the behavioral level, as "guests" living and studying in Chinese society, international students exhibit a strong awareness of and adherence to rules. However, this passive compliance does not readily translate into active legal practice or cultural dissemination. Despite their theoretical willingness to act as cultural bridges, the gap between cognition and behavior is most pronounced in "proactively introducing Chinese legal culture," indicating that their potential as effective cross-border disseminators of legal culture remains largely untapped and reinforces their status as cultural "outsiders" (Shen, 2014). With respect to "prioritizing legal channels to resolve disputes," although students universally deem it important, their actual performance scores decline significantly. This disconnect between theoretical identity and practical behavior reflects the universal dilemma of "law in books" versus "law in action" (Menkel-Meadow, 2004). It powerfully demonstrates that while students may trust the authority of the law in principle, their ability and willingness to use it as the primary tool for resolving actual conflicts are severely lacking. When faced with disputes, people often prefer alternative forms of dispute resolution (ADR), such as mediation, which is seen as better for maintaining relationships and being more cost effective (Al-Khafaji, 2021). Formal judicial proceedings are often perceived as a confrontational, winner-takes-all model that may fail to address the deeper interpersonal, emotional, and social needs underlying legal issues (Menkel-Meadow, 2004). Consequently, students tend to choose informal or nonconfrontational methods, a strategy reflecting both their caution as "outsiders" and their cultural preferences in conflict resolution, which constitute their greatest shortcomings in Chinese legal practice (Sander, 1985).

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

The preceding discussion confirms the structural misalignment hypothesized in H1, whereas our regression analysis illuminates the specific drivers of this gap, providing robust empirical support for H2 and H3. The crucial crux in enhancing the cross-legal cultural identity of international students lies in bridging the chasm between their deep-seated “value identity” at the cognitive level and their “practical experience” across the affective and behavioral dimensions. To effectively achieve this, universities and policymakers must execute a strategic shift from unilateral, management-oriented dissemination to a comprehensive support system that fosters both “two-way cultural integration” and “deep practical empowerment”.

Our findings concerning H2 indicate that fostering affective trust requires a deliberate transition toward rule-of-law governance and localized narratives. Universities must move away from isolated management models that prioritize administrative convenience over equal integration. Instead, institutions must adopt transparent and procedurally just practices—such as open hearings and the provision of legal justifications via multilingual written notifications—when handling disputes. This approach shifts students’ focus from guessing administrators’ personal emotions to understanding objective judicial procedures, directly enhancing trust and cultivating a true sense of a “legal community” (Chu, 2023). Many students harbor media-induced biases before arrival, which are corrected through real interactions; as a student from Tanzania shared: *“Influenced by Western media, I used to think that China basically had no courts or prisons. After coming to China, this misunderstanding no longer exists.”* When interactions with law enforcement occur, educational and fair treatment can build trust; for instance, a student from Georgia recalled: *“Once I was penalized by the traffic police for riding an electric scooter without a helmet, but I could understand because it was for my safety.”* Furthermore, to lower psychological defenses, legal education must transcend dry statutory readings by utilizing “localized narratives”. Analyzing real, relatable cases (Tang, 2024) helps explain unique Chinese legal logic, such as the emphasis on grassroots mediation and the integration of reason and law (Yan, 2026). In parallel, providing timely, transparent, and multilingual responses to public opinion crises serves as a vivid “rule-of-law story” that dispels rumors and mitigates misunderstandings caused by information asymmetry (Liu, 2022).

With respect to the findings related to H3, our model proves that cognitive willingness only translates into action when accessible pathways are provided, underscoring the need for deep practical empowerment. Universities should leverage their law school resources to establish normalized legal aid clinics, which can effectively offset the “fear of difficulty” caused by unfamiliar legal procedures (Wei & Li, 2017). By encouraging domestic and international students to collaborate on daily legal hurdles, universities facilitate the deep contact necessary to alleviate adaptation difficulties (Guo et al., 2024) and create a cognitive “third space” where practical legal knowledge is shared and mutual understanding is fostered (Gong, 2014). Beyond interpersonal support, leveraging

technological empowerment is crucial for overcoming the profound language barriers and information asymmetry that hinder behavioral engagement. Administrative departments and universities should actively embrace artificial intelligence (Liu, 2026) to develop AI-driven, multilingual legal consultation platforms. By transforming abstract laws into accessible, scenario-based guidance, these technologies substantively lower the threshold for seeking legal remedies (Zhou & Xing, 2022), thereby empowering international students to transition from passive “bystanders” of the legal order to active, capable “participants”.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While this study offers significant insights into the formation of legal–cultural identity, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The empirical data was drawn primarily from universities within Zhejiang Province and may not fully capture the diverse administrative environments and cross-cultural experiences of international students across other regions of China. Future research should strive to employ broader, national-level sampling to validate and extend these findings. Furthermore, because the current research relies on a cross-sectional design, it captures a specific snapshot of student identity. Subsequent longitudinal studies are highly recommended to track how the structural misalignment in students’ legal–cultural identity dynamically evolves over the entire duration of their academic stay, thereby providing deeper insights into the long-term effectiveness of the proposed empowerment pathways.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to systematically deconstruct the cross-legal cultural identity of international students in China. Our empirical findings reveal that the crucial crux of their adaptation lies in a profound “structural misalignment” between their deep-seated cognitive value identity and their practical experiences. While students demonstrate a strong macrolevel appreciation for the host country’s legal values, this cognitive foundation is frequently eroded and dissipated by a series of microlevel practical obstacles. Confronted with scarce information channels and linguistic or procedural barriers during actual rights disputes, students experience severe affective alienation, psychologically positioning themselves as “legitimate outsiders” situated within the system yet marginalized from the community. This fundamental disparity between ideal cognitive valuation and the reality of behavioral passivity is the root cause of the stagnation and difficulty in deepening the cross-legal identity of the international student community.

To effectively overcome this stagnation, host universities and policymakers must perform a strategic shift from management-oriented, unilateral rule dissemination to a comprehensive support system centered on “two-way cultural integration” and “deep practical empowerment”. Deep practical empowerment directly addresses the central dilemma of possessing “identity without power” by not only informing students of what their rights are but also, more importantly,

equipping them with the accessible tools and procedural confidence to exercise them. By utilizing diverse channels such as legal aid clinics, moot courts, and new media platforms, institutions can transform the law from a distant rulebook into a reliable and accessible life tool. Simultaneously, establishing platforms for cross-cultural dialog to promote mutual respect helps eliminate cultural barriers and foster an inclusive “legal community” atmosphere. Through this series of efforts, institutions can facilitate a fundamental identity transformation, helping international students evolve from passive “bystanders” of the legal order who merely obey rules into active “narrators” and participants capable of telling the story of the host country’s rule of law on the basis of personal experience. Ultimately, this will not only safeguard the well-being and satisfaction of the international student community but also build profound cultural bridges, enhancing the host country’s rule-of-law civilization on the global stage.

## **FUNDING**

This work was supported by the 2025 Youth Fund Project for Humanities and Social Sciences Research of the Ministry of Education (Project No. 25YJC860013) and the National Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program for College Students.

## **DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS**

The author(s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **OTHER IDENTIFYING INFORMATION**

The study involved a questionnaire survey and regression analysis of 307 international students.

## **Acknowledgment**

*In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:*

- ☒ None
- ☐ Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- ☐ Some sections, with extensive editing
- ☐ Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- ☐ Entire work, with extensive editing

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