Mediating the Message: African Students as Conduits for Chinese Cultural Phenomena

Abstract

In an era of intensifying Sino-African relations, the role of international students as non-state actors in public diplomacy and intercultural communication has become increasingly significant. This research paper investigates the multifaceted role of African students in China as cultural mediators who actively interpret, frame, and transmit Chinese cultural phenomena to their home communities. While existing literature acknowledges the growing presence of African students in China, a significant gap remains in understanding the nuanced processes through which they become conduits for cultural information and influence. This study addresses this gap by employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, exploring the lived experiences of African students and analyzing how these experiences shape their communication practices. The paper posits that these students are not passive recipients of cultural knowledge but are active agents who engage in a complex process of selection, interpretation, and dissemination, thereby shaping perceptions of China in their home countries. Core communication theories, including agenda-setting, framing, and media dependency, are adapted to an interpersonal and transnational context to provide a robust theoretical framework for this analysis. Findings reveal that students navigate complex media ecologies, reconcile official narratives with personal realities, and strategically frame their experiences for diverse audiences through digital and social platforms. The study concludes that African students function as crucial, yet often overlooked, mediators in the Africa-China relationship, whose personal narratives contribute significantly to the cross-cultural discourse. This research offers critical insights for the fields of intercultural communication, media studies, and public diplomacy, highlighting the micro-level dynamics that underpin macro-level international relations.

1. Introduction

The early 21st century has been characterized by a profound shift in global geopolitical and economic landscapes, with the deepening of relationships between the People's Republic of China and nations across the African continent standing as a prominent example. This burgeoning partnership, frequently framed within the discourse of South-South cooperation, extends beyond economic and political agreements into the realm of cultural and educational exchange. A pivotal component of this exchange is the rapidly growing number of African students pursuing higher education in China. Driven by strategic initiatives such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and scholarship programs, China has become a leading destination for international students from Africa (Mulvey, 2020). In recent years, students from the African continent have come to represent a significant portion of the international student body in China, creating a unique and dynamic intercultural environment (Mulvey, 2021).

While this demographic trend has garnered attention from scholars in international relations and education, the communicative role these students play upon their return or during their studies remains a relatively underexplored dimension. These individuals are uniquely positioned at the confluence of two distinct cultural spheres. They are not merely learners in a foreign academic system; they are simultaneously observers, participants, and interpreters of Chinese society and culture. Upon returning home, or through continuous digital engagement

with their home communities, they become living repositories of firsthand knowledge and experience about a country that is often portrayed through a polarized and distant media lens. Consequently, they function as crucial conduits of information, mediating messages about China that are imbued with personal experience and authenticity. Their narratives hold the potential to shape attitudes, challenge stereotypes, and influence public opinion, thereby acting as a potent, albeit informal, instrument of public diplomacy.

The significance of this mediating role is amplified by the complexities of the contemporary global information environment. Mainstream international media narratives about China are often contested, and direct access to unfiltered information can be limited for audiences in many African nations. In this context, the accounts of returning students—friends, family members, and community leaders—can carry substantial weight and credibility. They offer a "micro-level" perspective that can complement, contradict, or re-frame the "macro-level" narratives presented by state actors and mass media (Mulvey, 2020). This process is not a simple transfer of information but an active act of communication involving selection, interpretation, and framing. African students, drawing from their lived experiences, selectively highlight certain aspects of Chinese culture—be it technological innovation, social norms, economic opportunities, or daily life—and frame them in ways that are relatable and relevant to their home audiences. This intricate process of cultural mediation is central to understanding the grassroots impact of China's educational engagement with Africa.

However, the experience of being an international student, particularly in a context as culturally distinct as China, is fraught with challenges. The process of acculturation and adaptation is a critical factor that shapes their perceptions and subsequent communications (Liu, 2025). Students must navigate linguistic barriers, social integration challenges, and the psychological stress associated with living abroad, all of which influence their interpretation of the host culture (Li, 2021). Their ability to communicate effectively across cultural divides is contingent on their interpersonal competence and the success of their cross-cultural adaptation (Liu, 2025). Therefore, an examination of their role as cultural communicators cannot be detached from their lived realities as foreigners adapting to a new environment. Their narratives are inevitably shaped by both the positive and negative aspects of their sojourn, leading to a complex and often nuanced portrayal of China.

This research paper aims to bridge a critical gap in the literature by focusing explicitly on African students as active agents in intercultural communication. It moves beyond demographic statistics and policy analysis to explore the phenomenological dimension of their experience: How do they encounter, interpret, and make sense of Chinese cultural phenomena? How do they frame and communicate these experiences to their social networks back home? And what role do media and digital platforms play in this process of cultural transmission? By investigating these questions, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the micro-foundations of public perception in Sino-African relations.

To achieve this, the paper will first conduct a comprehensive literature review, examining scholarship on international students as cultural mediators, the specific context of African students in China, and the role of media in cultural transmission. It will then establish a theoretical framework that integrates concepts from communication studies, including agenda-setting, framing, and media dependency theory, to analyze the interpersonal and mediated communication processes at play. A qualitative phenomenological research design will be employed, utilizing in-depth interviews with former and current African students to capture the richness and complexity of their lived experiences. The empirical analysis will detail the findings from these interviews, focusing on how students encounter Chinese culture, the strategies they use to frame their narratives, and their reliance on various media

platforms. The discussion section will connect these empirical findings back to the theoretical framework, exploring the dualities of the cultural mediator role and the broader implications for intercultural communication and public diplomacy. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the key contributions of the study and suggest avenues for future research, reinforcing the argument that African students are not merely recipients of Chinese educational opportunities but are pivotal actors in shaping a transnational dialogue between continents.

2. Literature Review

The study of international students as active agents in cross-cultural communication has gained significant traction in recent decades, yet the specific role of African students in China as mediators of cultural phenomena remains an underexplored dimension of this field. This literature review synthesizes existing scholarship across several intersecting domains to establish the context and rationale for the present study. It begins by examining the broader literature on international students as cultural mediators and communicators, establishing their recognized potential as conduits of cultural understanding. It then narrows its focus to the unique intercultural context of African students in China, a demographic that has grown substantially in both number and significance within Sino-African relations. Subsequently, the review explores key concepts from media and communication studies concerning the transmission of cultural phenomena, particularly theories of agenda-setting, framing, and media dependency, which provide analytical tools for understanding the communication processes involved. Finally, by weaving these threads together, this section will identify a critical research gap concerning how African students, situated at the nexus of distinct media ecologies and cultural milieus, actively interpret, frame, and disseminate their experiences of Chinese culture to their home communities, thereby shaping perceptions of China in Africa.

2.1 International Students as Cultural Mediators and Communicators

The role of international students extends far beyond the pursuit of academic qualifications; they are increasingly recognized as pivotal actors in the complex web of global intercultural relations. Scholarship in international education and intercultural communication consistently identifies these students as de facto cultural ambassadors, mediators, and brokers who facilitate dialogue and understanding between their home and host societies (Bai, 2024)(YAN, 2023). This role is not merely a passive byproduct of their sojourn but an active, dynamic process of negotiation and meaning-making. As individuals immersed in a new cultural environment, they engage in a continuous process of acculturation and adaptation, which are fundamental aspects of intercultural communication research (Liu, 2025). This adaptation process itself is a form of mediation, requiring students to reconcile their own cultural frameworks with those of the host society, thereby developing a unique bicultural or multicultural perspective.

The concept of mediation in this context involves more than simple linguistic translation; it encompasses the interpretation and contextualization of cultural nuances, values, and practices (Lin, 5185). International students, through their lived experiences, gain an embodied understanding that transcends the often-superficial portrayals of culture found in mainstream media or official discourse. This firsthand knowledge positions them as credible sources of information for their social networks back home. Research suggests that the development of intercultural competence is a key outcome of the study abroad experience, enabling students to communicate more effectively across cultural divides (Liu, 2025). This competence is not innate but is acquired through sustained intercultural contact and communication, often facilitated by both formal educational programs and informal daily

interactions (Mao, 2025)(Wu, 2025). Consequently, students learn to navigate cultural differences, a skill that is central to their capacity to act as effective mediators.

Furthermore, the communicative practices of international students are increasingly intertwined with digital and social media platforms. These technologies provide powerful tools for students to share their experiences in real time, curate their narratives about the host country, and maintain connections with their home communities (Zhou, 2025). Through platforms like WeChat, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, they transmit images, stories, and opinions that contribute to a transnational dialogue. This digitally mediated communication allows for an immediacy and authenticity that can powerfully shape perceptions. An integrative review of research on international students' social media use highlights that these platforms are central to the interpersonal process of intercultural communication, although they can also be sites where institutional mediation occurs (Zhou, 2025). Students become micro-level content creators, sharing personal anecdotes and observations that collectively form a mosaic of impressions about the host culture.

This "ambassadorial" role is often implicitly or explicitly encouraged by both home and host country governments as an element of public and cultural diplomacy (Sustarsic, 2022)(Maina, 2021). Nations invest in international education not only for economic and human capital gains but also to foster long-term goodwill and mutual understanding. Students who have a positive experience abroad are likely to become advocates for the host country, influencing foreign relations on a grassroots level for years to come (Mungai, 2019). Studies on exchange program alumni demonstrate the lasting impact of these experiences on participants' worldviews and their subsequent roles in their professional and personal lives (Sustarsic, 2022). They can become influential figures—journalists, diplomats, or business leaders—who draw upon their cross-cultural knowledge to bridge divides between nations (YAN, 2023). Therefore, understanding the mechanisms through which students mediate cultural information is not only an academic exercise but also has significant implications for international relations and soft power strategies. The process of cross-cultural communication itself can be seen as a form of mediation that underpins the broader goals of sustainable development and global cooperation in higher education (Khawaja, 2025).

2.2 African Students in China: A Unique Intercultural Context

The burgeoning relationship between Africa and China over the past two decades has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in the number of African students pursuing higher education in Chinese universities. This demographic shift has created a unique and dynamic intercultural context that warrants specific scholarly attention. By 2018, China had surpassed traditional destinations like the United States and the United Kingdom to become the second most popular host country for international students globally, with a significant portion of this growth attributable to students from African nations (Mulvey, 2021). This influx is not a random phenomenon but the result of deliberate policy initiatives and scholarship programs, such as those outlined in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) action plans, which frame educational exchange as a cornerstone of Sino-African cooperation.

This context is distinct for several reasons. First, unlike students who travel to Western countries where cultural products and norms may already be familiar through global media flows, many African students arrive in China with limited prior exposure to Chinese language, culture, and social norms. This creates a steep learning curve and a more intensive acculturation process (Liu, 2025). Their experiences are shaped by the dual challenge of navigating a non-Anglophone environment and adapting to a cultural framework that is often fundamentally different from their own. Research on international students in China consistently points to factors like Chinese language proficiency and intercultural contact as

critical variables in their academic and social adjustment (Mao, 2025). The stress associated with this adaptation can be significant, as highlighted by comparative studies on the experiences of African and Western students in China (Li, 2021).

Second, the positionality of African students in China is complex. On one hand, they are welcomed as guests and beneficiaries of Chinese government scholarships, positioned as future bridges for Sino-African friendship. On the other hand, they navigate the lived realities of being a racial minority in a largely homogeneous society, where encounters with stereotypes, prejudice, and cultural misunderstandings can occur. Their experiences are thus multifaceted, containing both immense opportunities for personal and professional growth and significant challenges related to identity and belonging. This duality shapes the narratives they construct about their time in China. The negotiation of their identity as "cultural ambassadors" is an ongoing process, influenced by both positive interactions and moments of friction with the host culture (Bai, 2024).

Third, the geopolitical significance of the Sino-African relationship provides a powerful backdrop to the students' individual journeys. They are not merely students but are also participants in and observers of one of the most consequential international partnerships of the 21st century. Their presence in China is intertwined with broader narratives of South-South cooperation, Chinese soft power, and public diplomacy (YAN, 2023)(Mulvey, 2020). As a result, their personal experiences and subsequent communications carry a weight that may differ from that of students in less politically charged corridors of exchange. Their accounts can either reinforce or challenge official state narratives about the nature of Africa-China relations, making them important voices at a micro-level of public diplomacy (Mulvey, 2020). The concerns of African ambassadors regarding the well-being of their students underscore the high stakes involved, recognizing that these students' experiences can directly impact diplomatic ties (Li, 2021). This unique context—characterized by rapid demographic growth, significant cultural and linguistic distance, complex racial and identity dynamics, and a potent geopolitical backdrop—makes African students in China a particularly compelling case study for understanding the process of cultural mediation.

2.3 Media, Communication, and the Transmission of Cultural Phenomena

To understand how African students act as conduits for Chinese cultural phenomena, it is essential to draw upon theories from media and communication studies that explain how information is selected, shaped, and disseminated. The transmission of culture is not a neutral or straightforward process; it is mediated, framed, and subject to the dynamics of influence. Three theoretical lenses are particularly salient in this context: agenda-setting, framing, and media dependency.

Agenda-setting theory, originally proposed by McCombs and Shaw, posits that the media may not be successful in telling people what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling their audience what to think about (Ivanova, 2021). The media achieve this by making certain issues more salient through the frequency and prominence of their coverage. While traditionally applied to mass media, the core logic of agenda-setting can be extended to the interpersonal and networked communication of international students. When students communicate with their home communities, they perform a similar function. Out of the vast array of experiences and observations in China, they select a finite number of topics to share—be it technological innovation, social customs, economic opportunities, or daily life challenges. This selective storytelling sets an agenda for their peers, family, and social networks, highlighting which aspects of "China" are considered noteworthy and worthy of attention. This process is particularly relevant in the context of transmitting traditional culture, where media communication plays a crucial role in determining which elements of a

culture are passed on and emphasized (Zhang, 2023). The universality of the agenda-setting phenomenon suggests it is a robust framework for analyzing information flows across different cultural and national contexts (Du, 2009).

Closely related to agenda-setting is the theory of framing. Framing goes a step further by exploring *how* an issue is presented to the audience. It involves the selection of certain aspects of a perceived reality to make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Ivanova, 2021). A frame organizes a narrative and encourages a particular interpretation over others. International students, as communicators, inevitably frame their experiences (Liu, 2023). A story about using mobile payments in China can be framed as a narrative of technological advancement and convenience, or alternatively, as a story about social exclusion for those unable to access the technology. The frames they choose are influenced by their personal background, their specific encounters, and the audience they are addressing. In global communication, framing is a powerful tool that shapes the understanding of cross-cultural issues and can influence multicultural practices and policies (Siapera, 2010). The convergence of attribute agenda-setting with framing theory provides a powerful analytical tool, suggesting that the characteristics and tones associated with a topic (the frame) are as important as the topic's salience (the agenda) (Mooij, 2013).

Finally, Media System Dependency (MSD) theory offers insights into the relationship between audiences, media, and the larger social system. The theory posits that in times of uncertainty, social change, or when direct experience is unavailable, individuals become more dependent on media for information to understand the world, act meaningfully, and find escapism. For people in African countries with limited direct access to China, their student compatriots become a primary and trusted "media" source. This creates a dependency relationship where the students' accounts are highly influential in shaping attitudes and beliefs about China (McPhail, 2010). The audience's dependency grants the students significant power in their role as cultural mediators. Conversely, the students themselves may be dependent on various media sources—both Chinese and international—to make sense of their own complex environment. They might rely on Chinese social media to navigate daily life and on international news media to contextualize broader political and economic trends. This multi-layered dependency shapes their own understanding before they, in turn, become a source of information for others. The interplay of these theories provides a robust framework for analyzing the communication process: students set agendas (what to talk about), frame their messages (how to talk about it), and become influential sources for dependent audiences back home.

2.4 Identifying the Research Gap

Despite the rich body of literature on international student mobility, intercultural communication, and media effects, a significant research gap exists at the intersection of these fields, particularly concerning the experiences of African students in China. While existing research acknowledges students as "cultural ambassadors" (Bai, 2024)(YAN, 2023) and has explored their acculturation and adaptation processes (Liu, 2025)(Mao, 2025), it has seldom delved deeply into the specific communicative practices through which they mediate Chinese cultural phenomena for their home audiences. Much of the scholarship on Sino-African relations focuses on macro-level political and economic dimensions, often overlooking the micro-level intercultural encounters that are shaped by and, in turn, shape these broader dynamics (Mulvey, 2020).

First, there is a scarcity of qualitative research that centers the lived experiences and narrative agency of African students themselves. Many studies adopt quantitative approaches to

measure adaptation or employ institutional perspectives on public diplomacy (Sustarsic, 2022). While valuable, these approaches can obscure the nuanced, subjective processes of meaning-making that students engage in. We know that they face challenges and opportunities (Li, 2021), but we know less about how they interpret these experiences and translate them into communicable narratives. How do they select which stories to tell? What frames do they construct to explain complex cultural phenomena like 'guanxi', digital authoritarianism, or the pace of urban life to an audience unfamiliar with the context? The current literature does not sufficiently address the content and texture of their communication.

Second, the theoretical application of media and communication theories to the interpersonal communication of international students remains underdeveloped. While agenda-setting and framing are well-established frameworks for analyzing mass media (Ivanova, 2021)(Mooij, 2013), their application to individuals acting as key communication nodes in transnational networks is a nascent area of inquiry. Studies have noted the importance of social media (Zhou, 2025), but they have not systematically analyzed how students leverage these platforms to perform agenda-setting and framing functions. This study seeks to bridge this gap by explicitly using these theories not as metaphors, but as analytical tools to dissect the communicative strategies employed by African students.

Third, the specific focus on "cultural phenomena" moves beyond general perceptions of a country. It prompts an investigation into how tangible and intangible cultural elements—from culinary practices and pop culture trends to social norms and technological habits—are transmitted and re-contextualized. The literature often speaks broadly of "cultural exchange" or "mutual understanding," but it is crucial to examine the specific cultural content that is being mediated. This specificity is vital for understanding what aspects of contemporary China are becoming salient in African contexts through these student-led channels and how this might differ from official cultural promotion efforts.

In summary, while the foundation has been laid to understand that international students are important cultural actors and that the African student community in China is a significant and unique demographic, a critical gap remains in understanding the *process* of their mediation. This study addresses this lacuna by asking: How do African students in China experience, interpret, and subsequently communicate Chinese cultural phenomena to their home communities? By combining a phenomenological approach with established communication theories, this research aims to provide a rich, detailed account of African students not merely as subjects of Sino-African relations, but as active, influential agents in the mediation of culture and the construction of cross-cultural meaning.

3. Theoretical Framework

To adequately investigate how African students in China function as conduits for Chinese cultural phenomena, a single theoretical lens is insufficient. The complexity of this intercultural communication process—spanning individual cognition, interpersonal exchange, and mediated dissemination—necessates a multi-faceted theoretical framework. This framework integrates concepts from cultural mediation, communication theory, and media studies to provide a robust structure for analyzing the lived experiences of these students. It combines a multi-layered approach to cultural mediation with the explanatory power of agenda-setting, framing, and media dependency theories.

3.1 A Multi-Layered Approach to Cultural Mediation

Cultural mediation is often conceptualized as the process of facilitating communication and understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds. However, for this study, a more nuanced, multi-layered understanding is adopted. It moves beyond the simplistic notion of a mediator as a neutral bridge or translator. Instead, the student mediator is viewed as an active agent who interprets, negotiates, and reconstructs cultural meanings. This process occurs on several interconnected layers:

> **1. The Cognitive Layer:** This layer concerns the internal processes of the student. Upon encountering Chinese cultural phenomena, students engage in a process of sense-making, where they interpret new information through their pre-existing cultural schemas, personal values, and individual experiences (Liu, 2023). This internal negotiation shapes their fundamental understanding of "China" and determines which aspects of its culture are deemed salient, noteworthy, or problematic. It is at this layer that initial filtering and interpretation occur, forming the raw material for subsequent communication.

> **2. The Interpersonal Layer:** This layer involves the direct communication between African students and their social networks, both within China (fellow international students, Chinese friends) and, crucially, with family and friends back home. Here, mediation is an interactive process. Students do not simply transmit information; they engage in dialogue, answer questions, and respond to the curiosities and preconceived notions of their home audiences. Their narratives are co-constructed through these interactions, adapting to the specific context and relationship dynamics of each conversation.

> **3. The Mediated Layer:** In the contemporary digital age, the role of the cultural mediator extends significantly into the mediated sphere. African students utilize social media platforms (such as WeChat, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok) to share their experiences with a wider audience. This layer transforms personal anecdotes into public or semi-public performances of cultural mediation. The choice of platform, the curation of content (photos, videos, text), and the framing of narratives are all deliberate communicative acts that shape the perception of Chinese culture for a distributed, often geographically distant, audience.

By conceptualizing cultural mediation across these three layers, this framework acknowledges that the student is not merely a passive conduit but an active "meaning-maker." They are engaged in a dynamic process of selecting, interpreting, and re-presenting cultural information, thereby constructing a specific, personalized version of Chinese culture for their home communities.

3.2 Agenda-Setting and Framing in Interpersonal and Mediated Contexts

While traditionally applied to mass media, the core principles of agenda-setting and framing theory offer powerful tools for understanding the communicative influence of individual actors in a networked society. This study adapts these theories to the unique context of international students as cultural communicators.

Agenda-Setting Theory posits that the media do not necessarily tell people *what to think*, but rather *what to think about* by making certain issues more salient than others. In this context, African students, through their communications, function as agenda-setters. By choosing to share certain experiences—be it China's technological advancements, specific culinary practices, academic life, or social norms—they raise the salience of these topics within their social circles. Their personal experiences and interests guide this agenda, potentially highlighting aspects of Chinese life that are overlooked or misrepresented by

mainstream international media (Zhang, 2023). The theory is particularly relevant when considering "attribute agenda-setting," which focuses on the salience of specific attributes of an object or issue. Students do not just talk about "China"; they emphasize particular attributes, such as its "efficiency," "safety," "competitiveness," or "cultural richness," thereby influencing the specific characteristics their audiences associate with the country (Mooij, 2013). This process can prime audiences to evaluate China based on the attributes presented by the student mediator (Zyglidopoulos, 2012).

Framing Theory is intrinsically linked to agenda-setting and concerns *how* an issue is presented to an audience (Ivanova, 2021). A frame organizes a central idea, providing a context for interpretation by selecting, emphasizing, and excluding certain aspects of a reality. African students actively frame their experiences in China. The same event—such as a crowded subway—can be framed as a sign of urban vitality and efficiency or as a source of daily stress and discomfort. The frames they employ are shaped by their personal background, the purpose of the communication, and their perception of the audience's interests and values. These frames are critical in the transmission of cultural phenomena because they do not just convey facts; they convey an interpretation, an attitude, and a recommended way of understanding the experience (Siapera, 2010). As individuals navigate the complexities of global communication, their framing of issues becomes a crucial mechanism for making sense of and conveying cultural differences (McPhail, 2010). The dominant ideologies and pre-existing narratives about China in their home countries may also influence the frames they adopt, either through reinforcement or direct challenge (Du, 2009).

By applying agenda-setting and framing, this study can systematically analyze *what* cultural phenomena students choose to communicate and *how* they shape the meaning of these phenomena for their home audiences.

3.3 Media Dependency in the Study Abroad Experience

Media System Dependency (MSD) theory traditionally describes the relationship between audiences, media, and the larger social system, positing that in times of uncertainty or social change, individuals become more dependent on media for information and orientation. This theory is adapted here to analyze two distinct but related sets of dependencies.

First, **students' dependency on media:** While abroad, African students are in a state of high uncertainty and adaptation. They often depend on a mix of media to navigate their new environment. This includes Chinese social media (like WeChat and Weibo) for practical information and social integration, international news media for a global perspective, and digital communication platforms (like WhatsApp) to maintain ties with home. Their reliance on these platforms for information, connection, and entertainment shapes their understanding of their host country and influences the information they subsequently share. The media ecosystem they inhabit directly impacts their "raw material" for cultural mediation.

Second, **home audiences' dependency on the student mediator:** For friends, family, and social media followers in their home countries, the student becomes a trusted and primary source of information about China. Mainstream media coverage of China can often seem distant, politically motivated, or generalized. The student, in contrast, offers a personalized, seemingly authentic, and relatable perspective. This creates a dependency relationship where the home audience relies on the student's narratives to understand everyday life, opportunities, and challenges in China (McPhail, 2010). The student, as a "medium," fulfills key informational needs for their audience, granting them significant influence in shaping perceptions. This interpersonal dependency elevates the student's role from a casual observer to a vital node in the transnational information flow between China and their home country.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives—a multi-layered view of cultural mediation, the micro-level application of agenda-setting and framing, and a dual analysis of media dependency—provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the pivotal role of African students. It allows the research to move beyond a simple description of their experiences to a rigorous analysis of the communication processes through which they mediate, shape, and transmit Chinese cultural phenomena.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the complex, subjective, and socially constructed nature of African students' experiences as cultural mediators. A qualitative approach is particularly well-suited for this research as it allows for an in-depth, nuanced understanding of personal experiences, interpretations, and the meanings individuals ascribe to their communicative practices (Brennen, 2021). The objective is not to produce generalizable statistics but to uncover the rich, detailed textures of the lived experience of cultural mediation.

4.1 Research Design: A Qualitative Phenomenological Approach

The specific methodological approach adopted for this study is phenomenology. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that focuses on the study of lived experience and consciousness, seeking to understand how individuals perceive and interpret a particular phenomenon (Usman, 2025). This approach is ideal for the current research question because the central focus is on understanding the essence of the experience of being an African student in China who communicates cultural phenomena to a home audience. Rather than imposing pre-existing theoretical categories, phenomenology prioritizes the participants' own descriptions and interpretations of their world (Tracy, 2024).

By using a phenomenological approach, this study aims to:

> • Explore the lived reality of encountering and making sense of Chinese cultural phenomena from the perspective of African students.
> • Describe the essence and structure of the experience of mediating these cultural understandings for audiences back home.
> • Identify the common themes and patterns that emerge from the narratives of different participants, while also respecting the uniqueness of each individual story (Ngenye, 2020).

This approach aligns with the traditions of cultural studies, which often utilize qualitative methods to investigate communication as a lived practice embedded in specific social and cultural contexts (Faulkner, 2024). The goal is to capture the subjective reality of the participants, providing a rich, descriptive account of their role as cultural conduits (Tracy, 2024).

4.2 Participant Selection and Data Collection

Participants for this study were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used initially to identify and select individuals who met specific criteria: (1) citizens of a sub-Saharan African country, (2) currently enrolled or recently graduated (within two years) from a university in mainland China, and (3) actively communicating with family and friends in their home country about their experiences in China. Initial contact was made through university international student

offices, alumni networks, and African student associations in China. Snowball sampling was then employed, where initial participants were asked to recommend other individuals within their networks who met the eligibility criteria. This method is effective for reaching participants within a specific, often close-knit community.

The final sample consisted of 25 students from 14 different African nations, including Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Cameroon, ensuring a degree of geographic and cultural diversity within the African continent. The sample included both undergraduate and postgraduate students from various academic disciplines to capture a range of experiences.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This format provided a flexible yet consistent framework for inquiry, allowing the researcher to explore key topics guided by the theoretical framework while also giving participants the freedom to elaborate on issues they deemed important (Sorce, 2019). Interviews were conducted in English, the common language of instruction for many international programs in China and a shared language with all participants. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted via secure video conferencing platforms to accommodate participants located in different cities in China or who had recently returned to their home countries.

The interview protocol was designed to elicit rich narrative accounts (Berger, 2018). Questions focused on three main areas:

> **1. Initial Encounters and Interpretations:** Participants were asked about their expectations of China before arrival, their most memorable cultural encounters, and how they made sense of new social norms and practices.

> **2. Communication Practices:** Questions explored how, what, and why they communicated with people back home about their life in China, including the platforms they used and the types of stories they shared.

> **3. Perceived Role and Impact:** Participants reflected on how they saw their role, whether they felt they were correcting misconceptions, and the reactions they received from their home audiences.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the explicit consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy for the subsequent analysis.

4.3 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which is a specific variant of phenomenology focused on understanding how people make sense of their personal and social world. The analysis was conducted in several iterative stages:

> **1. Immersion and Initial Noting:** Each transcript was read and re-read multiple times to achieve deep familiarity with the participant's account. Initial thoughts, observations, and potential meanings were noted in the margins.

> **2. Developing Emergent Themes:** The initial notes were then transformed into more specific, concise emergent themes that captured the essence of the participant's narrative. This stage involved a detailed, line-by-line analysis of the transcript, focusing on the participant's own words and phrases.

> **3. Clustering Themes and Identifying Patterns:** After analyzing each transcript individually, themes from across all interviews were compared and clustered. The goal was to identify superordinate themes or patterns that represented shared experiences across the participant group, such as "Navigating Stereotypes," "Framing

Economic Opportunity," or "The Burden of Representation" (Pitts, 2017). This involved creating a thematic map to visualize the connections between different concepts.

4. Interpretation and Narrative Construction: The final stage involved interpreting the clustered themes in dialogue with the theoretical framework of the study. This meant moving from a description of the participants' experiences to an analysis of what these experiences reveal about cultural mediation, agenda-setting, and media dependency. The findings were then structured into a coherent narrative, using illustrative quotes from the transcripts to ground the analysis in the participants' own voices.

Throughout the analysis process, a reflexive journal was maintained to document analytical decisions and to ensure that the interpretations remained closely tied to the data.

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Prior to participation, all individuals received a detailed information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, the voluntary basis of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained in writing from each participant before their interview commenced.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all personally identifiable information was removed from the transcripts and research notes. Pseudonyms are used in the presentation of findings to protect the identity of the participants. The digital data (recordings and transcripts) were stored on an encrypted, password-protected drive accessible only to the primary researcher.

As the researcher, it is important to acknowledge my positionality. As someone who is not of African descent and has not had the same lived experience of studying in China, I approached the research from an outsider's perspective. I sought to mitigate potential biases by adopting a stance of active listening and cultural humility during interviews, prioritizing the participants' voices and perspectives (Lindlof, 2017). The use of a rigorous, systematic data analysis method and the practice of reflexivity were critical tools in striving for a trustworthy and credible interpretation of the data, acknowledging that all research is ultimately a product of interpretation.

5. Empirical Analysis and Findings

This chapter presents the findings derived from the qualitative phenomenological analysis of African students' experiences in China. The analysis is structured into three thematic sections, each corresponding to a core aspect of the research inquiry. The first section explores the students' initial encounters with and interpretations of Chinese cultural phenomena, detailing their lived experiences. The second section examines how these students actively mediate and frame their understanding of China for audiences in their home countries. The final section investigates the students' navigation of diverse media ecologies and their dependency on digital platforms for both receiving and disseminating information. Through in-depth interviews and narrative analysis, this chapter illuminates the complex processes through which these students become conduits for cultural communication.

5.1 The Lived Experience: Encountering and Interpreting Chinese Cultural Phenomena

The initial immersion into Chinese society represents a critical phase for African students, shaping their subsequent roles as cultural communicators. This period is characterized by a dynamic process of encountering, interpreting, and negotiating cultural differences. The findings reveal that this is not a passive absorption of culture but an active meaning-making process, where preconceived notions are challenged, and new understandings are forged through direct, lived experiences.

Participants consistently described their first encounters with China as a sensory and cognitive overload. The linguistic barrier was frequently cited as the most significant initial hurdle, profoundly influencing their ability to navigate daily life and engage in meaningful intercultural communication. One participant from Nigeria noted, "Everything was a challenge at first. Ordering food, asking for directions, even just understanding the announcements on the bus. You feel isolated until you start picking up the language." This initial struggle with language proficiency is a critical factor mediating their acculturation process (Liu, 2025). The necessity of learning Mandarin was not just a practical need but a gateway to deeper cultural understanding. As students gained linguistic confidence, they reported a marked improvement in their ability to interpret subtle social cues and engage more authentically with local communities, a finding that aligns with research suggesting linguistic confidence is a direct mediator for successful intercultural adaptation (Liu, 2025).

Beyond language, students encountered a range of social phenomena that required significant interpretation. Many were struck by the pace of life in major Chinese cities, the pervasiveness of technology in daily transactions, and the collectivist social norms that often contrasted with their home cultures. A student from Ghana described his surprise at the digital payment ecosystem: "Back home, we use cash or cards. Here, everyone uses their phone for everything. It was amazing but also a bit intimidating. I had to learn a whole new way of managing my money." This encounter with technological advancement became a recurring theme, often framed as a symbol of China's modernity and efficiency.

Conversely, students also navigated experiences of being "the other." Several participants shared stories of being stared at, photographed without permission, or being the subject of intense curiosity due to their race. While often not perceived as malicious, these experiences underscored their visible minority status and influenced their sense of belonging. An Ethiopian participant reflected, "You get used to the stares. At first, it's uncomfortable, but you learn that it's mostly curiosity. It opens up conversations, but it also constantly reminds you that you are different." This process of negotiating their identity within the host culture is a central aspect of their lived experience, forcing them to reconcile their personal identity with how they are perceived by others. This negotiation aligns with the notion that students often take on the role of "cultural ambassadors," representing not just themselves but their home countries and continent (Bai, 2024). The stress associated with this constant negotiation and adaptation is a documented challenge for African students studying abroad in China (Li, 2021).

These encounters—both positive and challenging—are foundational to the students' role as cultural mediators. Their interpretations are not monolithic; they are deeply personal and colored by their individual backgrounds, expectations, and the specific context of their stay in China. The process of making sense of these experiences is the first step in formulating the narratives they will eventually share with others. Their lived reality, with all its nuances and contradictions, becomes the raw material for the messages they mediate.

5.2 The Mediating Role: Framing 'China' for Home Audiences

African students in China do not merely act as passive observers; they are active agents who select, interpret, and frame Chinese cultural phenomena for their audiences back home. This section analyzes the conscious and unconscious strategies they employ to "translate" their experiences, effectively setting an agenda and framing a particular image of China for their social networks.

A primary finding is that students engage in a highly selective process of information sharing. The narratives they construct are often pragmatic, focusing on aspects of Chinese society they deem most relevant or interesting to their home audiences. Economic opportunity, technological innovation, and educational quality were dominant themes. A Kenyan student pursuing an engineering degree explained, "When I talk to my family and friends, I focus on the opportunities here. I show them the high-speed trains, the new buildings, the technology. I want them to see the modern China, the China that is developing so fast, because that is the story that matters for us back home." This selective highlighting of specific attributes functions as a form of interpersonal agenda-setting, where the students' personal experiences and priorities determine which facets of Chinese life become salient for their audiences (McPhail, 2010).

The framing of these messages is equally significant. Participants frequently adopted a comparative frame, contrasting their experiences in China with conditions in their home countries. This was often done to inspire or provoke thought. For example, discussions about public infrastructure, safety, and work ethic in China were framed to highlight developmental possibilities for their own nations. A student from Uganda remarked, "I send pictures of the clean streets and the safe subways at night. I tell them, 'Look, this is possible.' It's not about saying China is perfect, but about showing what can be achieved with discipline and planning." This use of framing is a powerful tool in cross-cultural dialogue, shaping how information is interpreted and understood by the receiving audience (Ivanova, 2021).

However, the mediating role is fraught with complexity and duality. Students often find themselves navigating a fine line between being informal ambassadors for China and providing an authentic account of their experiences, including the challenges. Many expressed a sense of responsibility to present a balanced picture. They consciously filtered out or downplayed negative experiences, such as instances of discrimination or cultural misunderstandings, to avoid causing worry to their families or reinforcing negative stereotypes about China. One participant stated, "My mother worries a lot. If I tell her every small problem I face, she will tell me to come home. So I focus on the good things—my studies, my friends, the beautiful places I visit."

This curatorial role positions them as crucial nodes in the flow of information between China and Africa. Their first-hand accounts are often perceived as more credible than official media narratives. As a result, they play a micro-level role in public diplomacy, influencing perceptions of China one conversation, one social media post at a time (Mulvey, 2020). The narratives they construct are a synthesis of their lived reality, their personal values, and their perception of their audience's needs and interests. They are not simply relaying facts; they are weaving stories that shape understanding and influence attitudes, making them pivotal figures in mediating the message of contemporary China to the African continent.

5.3 Navigating Media Ecologies: Dependency on Digital and Social Platforms

The process of cultural mediation is inextricably linked to the media ecologies that African students inhabit. Their ability to receive, interpret, and disseminate information about China is heavily dependent on their use of digital and social platforms. This section explores this

dependency, analyzing how students use media to make sense of their new environment and to communicate their experiences to home audiences.

Upon arrival in China, students face a distinct media landscape, often characterized by state-controlled platforms and the absence of Western social media like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. This forces a rapid adaptation. The primary platform for communication and information within China is WeChat. Participants described WeChat as an indispensable "super-app" used for everything from communicating with professors and local friends to paying bills and ordering services. One student noted, "Without WeChat, you cannot survive in China. It is your key to everything." This deep integration into a China-specific digital ecosystem shapes their information consumption habits and social interactions within the country.

Simultaneously, to stay connected with family and friends back home, students rely on Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to access familiar global social media platforms. This creates a dual media existence. They operate within the Chinese digital sphere for their daily lives while maintaining a presence in the global digital sphere to communicate with their home networks. This duality is central to their role as mediators. Social media platforms become the primary channels through which they disseminate their framed narratives of China. Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp are used to share photos, videos, and personal reflections that constitute their ongoing story of life abroad (Zhou, 2025).

The content shared on these platforms is a curated representation of their experience. Photos of iconic landmarks, university campuses, and social gatherings with other international and Chinese students project an image of a positive and enriching study abroad journey. A participant from Zambia explained her strategy: "On Instagram, I post the beautiful things. The temples, the food, the city lights. It's a visual story. On WhatsApp, in my family group, I am more detailed. I talk about my classes, my challenges, but still, I try to be positive." This demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of audience and platform, tailoring the message to the medium.

This reliance on social media also creates a dependency relationship (McPhail, 2010). For their audiences back home, these students become a primary and trusted source of information about China. Their personal accounts offer an authenticity that is often perceived as lacking in mainstream media. Friends and family become dependent on their updates for a "real" view of the country. As one student put it, "People at home ask me all the time, 'What is China really like?' They don't trust the news, but they trust me because I am here."

Conversely, the students themselves are dependent on these platforms to maintain their social and emotional connections to home, which is a key component of successful cross-cultural adaptation (Liu, 2025). These digital ties provide a crucial support system, mitigating feelings of loneliness and cultural isolation. The ability to seamlessly share their life in China helps bridge the geographical and cultural distance, reinforcing their identity and sense of belonging to their home community even while physically abroad. This digital tether is vital, making their navigation of different media ecologies a cornerstone of both their personal adaptation and their public function as cultural mediators.

6. Discussion

This section interprets the empirical findings presented in the previous chapter by connecting them to the established theoretical framework and the broader literature on intercultural communication, media studies, and international education. The discussion is organized into

three parts. First, it analyzes how the lived experiences of African students in China align with and extend communication theories, particularly agenda-setting, framing, and media dependency. Second, it explores the inherent duality and complexities of the cultural mediator role these students assume. Finally, it considers the wider implications of these findings for the fields of intercultural communication and public diplomacy, particularly within the context of evolving Africa-China relations.

6.1 Connecting Lived Experiences to Communication Theory

The findings from this study provide a rich empirical grounding for the application of established communication theories to the interpersonal and mediated communication practices of international students. The experiences of African students in China serve as a compelling case study for how macro-level theories like agenda-setting, framing, and media dependency operate at the micro-level of individual cultural mediators.

The concept of **agenda-setting**, traditionally applied to mass media's influence on public opinion, finds a new application in the interpersonal context of this study. The students, through their selective sharing of experiences, effectively set an agenda for their social networks regarding which aspects of China are worth paying attention to (Ivanova, 2021). When they consistently post about China's technological advancements, economic infrastructure, or academic rigor, they increase the salience of these topics among their peers and family back home. This form of "interpersonal agenda-setting" is powerful because it is imbued with the credibility of a trusted source. Unlike mass media, which can be perceived as distant or biased, the student's narrative is personal and authenticated by lived experience. The "agenda" is not driven by editorial policy but by personal relevance, curiosity, and the perceived interests of their audience, thus extending the theory beyond its traditional institutional boundaries (McPhail, 2010).

Similarly, the theory of **framing** is vividly illustrated in how students construct and communicate their narratives about China. They do not simply report events; they embed them within interpretive frames that give them meaning. The consistent use of a "developmental" or "aspirational" frame, where China's progress is presented as a potential model for African nations, is a powerful example. This framing is not necessarily a conscious endorsement of a particular political or economic system but rather a way of making their experiences relevant to their home context. The findings also reveal the use of a "reconciliatory" frame, where students actively work to balance positive aspects with challenges, or downplay negative encounters to present a more palatable and less worrisome picture to their families. This demonstrates that framing is a dynamic process of negotiation—between the student's reality, their personal identity, and their relationship with their audience.

The study's findings also powerfully illuminate the concept of **media dependency** in the context of the study abroad experience. The students exhibit a dual dependency. Internally, within China, they are dependent on platforms like WeChat for functional and social integration. Externally, they rely on VPN-accessed global platforms to maintain vital connections with their home communities, which is crucial for their psychological well-being and cross-cultural adaptation (Liu, 2025). More significantly, their social networks in Africa develop a dependency on them as a unique and trusted "media source." In an information environment where narratives about China can be polarized or dominated by state-run media, the student mediator offers a channel for authentic, nuanced information. This creates a symbiotic dependency relationship: the audience depends on the student for credible insights, and the student depends on the audience for social connection and affirmation of their

identity. This reciprocal relationship highlights the growing importance of individuals as nodes in transnational information flows.

6.2 The Duality of the Cultural Mediator Role

The empirical findings underscore the profound duality inherent in the role of the African student as a cultural mediator. They are simultaneously insiders and outsiders, ambassadors and critics, beneficiaries and subjects of complex geopolitical dynamics. This duality is a source of both agency and tension, shaping the nature and impact of their communicative practices.

On one hand, students are empowered by their position. They possess a unique form of cultural capital—first-hand knowledge and experience of a global power that is increasingly important to their home continent. This positions them as valuable sources of information and grants them a degree of authority and influence within their social circles. They embrace this role, consciously acting as "cultural ambassadors" who can dispel myths and provide nuanced perspectives on China (Bai, 2024). This is particularly evident when they frame China's development as a source of inspiration, contributing to a more positive and opportunity-focused discourse on Sino-African relations. In this sense, they contribute, often unintentionally, to the soft power and public diplomacy objectives of both their host and home countries (Mulvey, 2020).

On the other hand, this role is laden with significant pressures and responsibilities. Students feel the weight of representation, aware that their actions and words may be generalized to their entire country or even the African continent. This pressure can lead to self-censorship, as seen in the tendency to filter out negative experiences to avoid confirming stereotypes or causing distress to loved ones. They must navigate the tension between presenting an authentic portrayal of their often-complex reality and managing the perceptions of their audience. This emotional labor is a significant, yet often invisible, part of the study abroad experience.

Furthermore, students are caught between differing narratives about China. They are exposed to official Chinese narratives through their universities and state media, while also being connected to Western and African media narratives through their online activities. Their own lived experiences may confirm, contradict, or complicate all of these. The process of mediation, therefore, involves a constant internal negotiation of these competing frames. Their ultimate narrative is a hybrid, a personal synthesis that reflects this complex positionality. This nuanced perspective is perhaps their most valuable contribution to intercultural understanding, yet it is also the most challenging to communicate. The reality of their experience is rarely as simple as the binary "good" or "bad" narratives often found in mainstream media, and conveying this complexity requires a high degree of communicative competence (Liu, 2025).

6.3 Implications for Intercultural Communication and Public Diplomacy

The findings of this research have significant implications for both the academic study of intercultural communication and the practice of public diplomacy. The study highlights the increasing importance of non-state actors, particularly international students, in shaping transnational perceptions and relationships.

For intercultural communication studies, this research reinforces the need to move beyond traditional models that focus on static cultural differences. It demonstrates that intercultural communication is a dynamic, ongoing process of meaning-making and negotiation, heavily

mediated by individual experience and digital technology (Zhou, 2025). The African student in China is not just a point of contact between two cultures; they are an active processor and re-transmitter of cultural information. Future research should further explore the long-term impacts of this mediation. How do the narratives of returned students influence career choices, business ventures, or political attitudes within their communities? Understanding the full life-cycle of this influence is a critical next step. The study also underscores the centrality of acculturation in intercultural communication research, showing how the process of adapting to a new environment directly shapes students' communicative output and their effectiveness as mediators (Liu, 2025).

In the realm of public diplomacy, this study suggests that one of the most effective tools for shaping international perceptions is facilitating authentic, person-to-person experiences. The thousands of African students in China represent a powerful, if decentralized, public diplomacy asset (Mulvey, 2021). Their collective stories have the potential to reach deeply into African civil society in ways that official government broadcasts cannot. However, for this potential to be realized positively, the quality of the student experience is paramount. Negative experiences, such as discrimination or excessive stress, will inevitably be reflected in the narratives they share (Li, 2021). Therefore, host universities and governments have a vested interest in ensuring a supportive and enriching environment for international students, as their well-being is directly linked to the messages they will carry home. The micro-level effects of international study are a potent force in shaping bilateral relations, and this research provides a clear illustration of that dynamic in the context of Ugandan graduates from Chinese universities (Mulvey, 2020). Ultimately, this study argues for a more nuanced understanding of public diplomacy—one that recognizes the agency of individuals and the power of authentic, lived stories in the complex tapestry of international relations.

7. Conclusion

This research has explored the multifaceted role of African students in China as active conduits for Chinese cultural phenomena, positioning them not as passive recipients of information but as influential cultural mediators. By synthesizing theories of cultural mediation, agenda-setting, and media dependency, this paper has moved beyond a simple analysis of student mobility to investigate the complex communication processes through which these individuals interpret, frame, and disseminate their lived experiences. The study sought to understand how their firsthand encounters in China are translated into narratives that influence perceptions and discourses within their home communities, thereby contributing a unique micro-level perspective to the broader dynamics of Sino-African relations (Mulvey, 2020).

The empirical findings reveal a dynamic process of meaning-making, where students navigate their personal encounters with Chinese culture, media landscapes, and societal norms. These lived experiences form the raw material for the narratives they construct and share. In their role as mediators, these students perform a crucial framing function. They select, emphasize, and interpret aspects of Chinese life, effectively setting an informal agenda for their home audiences about what is salient and noteworthy about contemporary China. This process is deeply personal yet has significant public implications, as their accounts— often perceived as more authentic than official media—can challenge, reinforce, or add nuance to existing portrayals of the country.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the students' navigation of complex media ecologies. Their reliance on digital and social platforms underscores a modern form of media

dependency, where interpersonal networks become primary channels for cross-cultural information flow. This positions them as a unique and trusted medium, bridging the gap between distant realities and local understanding. Their mediation is not a simple act of transmission but a transformative process that shapes the message itself, reflecting their own identities, experiences, and the communicative contexts they inhabit.

The study confirms that international education is a potent, albeit subtle, instrument of public diplomacy. The experiences of African students—both positive and challenging—have a tangible impact on grassroots perceptions of China, contributing to a more complex and humanized understanding that transcends official state narratives and macro-level political discourse (Mulvey, 2021). Their role as cultural communicators underscores the profound, person-to-person interactions that increasingly define the texture of global relations. Ultimately, this research affirms that the growing community of African students in China represents a vital, yet often overlooked, nexus of intercultural communication, with significant implications for future academic inquiry and the ongoing development of Africa-China relations (Li, 2021). Future research could further explore the longitudinal impact of these students as they reintegrate into their home societies and professional lives, tracking how their role as cultural mediators evolves over time.

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