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From Instrumental Domination to Meaning Translation: A Paradigm Reconstruction of Culturally Sensitive Governance in Higher Education Internationalisation

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Abstract

In the process of shifting from scale expansion to substantive development in international student education at higher education institutions, traditional governance theories—due to their epistemological notions of "cultural neutrality" and "rational homogeneity" —have encountered a dual dilemma of limited explanatory power and practical failure in university environments characterized by deep multicultural integration. This paper employs a critical philosophical perspective to identify three major challenges inherent in conventional governance models within the context of university internationalization. Building on this, it proposes a redefinition of culturally sensitive governance, advocating a theoretical shift from "disembodied" to "embodied" approaches while upholding the cultural subjectivity of China. The study identifies an evolutionary pathway grounded in cultural cognition and the translation of subjectivity as its logical foundation, supported by collaborative efforts among multiple stakeholders and institutional innovation adaptations. Particular emphasis is placed on reshaping China's national education into a profound mechanism of "meaning translation," enabling international students to transition from passive management subjects to active governance participants with cultural empathy through contextualized interpretations of local institutional logic.

I. Formation of the Research Question

The internationalization of higher education, the most ambitious educational vision of the 21st century, is transforming the way universities operate with an unstoppable momentum. According to the UNESCO 2025 report, the number of students engaged in cross-border higher education mobility (overseas students) has reached approximately 6.9 million, three times the figure in 2000 [1]. China is the world's largest source country for international students and Asia's top destination for study abroad, with the number of international students in recent years exceeding 500,000, hailing from over 190 countries and regions [2]. As tens of thousands of diverse cultural entities enter Chinese universities, campuses have ceased to be tranquil havens under a single cultural framework, evolving into multicultural coexistence spaces characterized by tension, conflict, and negotiation. However, against the backdrop of profound structural changes, governance practices have struggled forward, even falling into the quagmire of governance failure due to certain inertial forces.

This issue stems not merely from outdated management approaches or insufficient institutional frameworks, but rather from a more profound and fundamental epistemological crisis inherent in the governance logic. For decades, the efficiency-first philosophy promoted by New Public Management (NPM) has reduced higher education governance to a mechanized "input-output" process. As scholars have warned, the outcome of technological instrumental rationality is the exclusion of human agency and erosion of subjectivity. In internationalized higher education governance, human agency has been significantly marginalized. The prevailing practice involves international student administrators applying disembodied, supposedly objective and neutral bureaucratic rules to discipline embodied students with distinct cultural identities. This governance model rests on three fragile assumptions: cultural neutrality (the existence of universally applicable governance principles), rational homogeneity (uniform cognitive frameworks among all stakeholders), and effective collaboration (the belief that reasonable cooperation mechanisms enable cross-cultural synergy [4]). However, within the multicultural context of globalized higher education, these assumptions face significant challenges.

When we base our approach on the unique historical and cultural context of a given society to manage individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, could the absence of culturally sensitive, human-centered governance lead to systemic cultural exclusion? In recent years, issues such as poorly designed social interaction mechanisms and conflicts in the allocation of public resources on campuses have frequently been framed within the discourse of

"privilege concerns," sparking widespread public skepticism about international student affairs in higher education institutions. Are these not precisely the manifestations of the shortcomings inherent in traditional governance models when confronting the complexities of multiculturalism? The root cause lies in a more profound problem: grounded in Western cultural frameworks and rational choice theory, traditional governance theories exhibit systemic inadequacies when applied to the university environment characterized by multicultural integration [1].

Therefore, this paper aims to conduct a "minimally invasive analysis" of traditional governance theories from an ontological perspective. By examining diverse practices in international student management, it identifies the shortcomings of conventional governance frameworks within cross-cultural contexts and proposes a culturally sensitive governance paradigm to address challenges in managing international students while re-examining the philosophical question of "how education is possible."

II. Literature Review

(1) Overall Research Overview and Evaluation

The internationalization of higher education is the most prominent structural phenomenon in the global development of higher education during the 21st century [1]. With the number of students participating in cross-border higher education programs worldwide having tripled [1], China has become the largest destination for international students in Asia, with over 500,000 international students enrolled, and campuses have evolved into dynamic, conflict-filled spaces for multicultural coexistence [2]. Academic research primarily focuses on micro-practical issues such as the expansion of international student enrollment, homogenized administrative management, equity challenges arising from the allocation of special resources, and cross-cultural psychological adaptation, while deeper reflections on the governance logic and epistemological aspects of university internationalization remain limited [1]. The pace of theoretical development lags significantly behind research on conventional governance in general higher education.

Over the past decade, the scope of academic research has continuously expanded, evolving from initial focus on interpreting policies and practices related to "convergent management" [5] and exploring transitional models between differentiated support and convergence[5], to developing strategies within the context of East-West cultural integration[7], investigating approaches for ideological education under convergent conditions[8], and conducting pragmatic attempts to incorporate the principle of "differences within similarities" into campus-based convergent management practices[9]. It has been established that international students in universities face structural disadvantages in areas such as language proficiency, social support networks, and cultural adaptation, leading to proposed corresponding management improvement measures[7]. Some scholars have also advocated, at a macro level, greater emphasis on separating administrative functions from operational responsibilities in higher education and applying public governance theories to universities[10][11]; furthermore, based on principles of governance transformation, they advocate shifting university internationalization management from traditional public governance paradigms toward modern frameworks such as New Public Governance (NPG)[10].

However, most studies fail to recognize that the deep-seated reasons for the governance challenges faced by international student communities in universities lie in the comprehensive obscuration of cultural meaning dimensions by technological rationality. When traditional governance theories are applied to the university context, due to the epistemological premises of "cultural neutrality" and "rational homogeneity," the issue of "cultural blindness" persists stubbornly [10]. This easily leads to the alienation of governance into purely managerial bureaucratic structures and administrative disciplinatory techniques [4], depriving administrators of the ability to perform "meaning translation" of local institutional logic toward heterogeneous international student subjects [11]

and trapping the contextual interpretation of local institutional logic in a vicious cycle [11]. Moving forward, it is essential to establish a comprehensive institutional framework that, while upholding the cultural subjectivity of China, creates a robust platform for "culture-sensitive governance" [1].

(II) Overview and Evaluation of Research on Cultural Sensitivity/Cross-Cultural Governance

Only a limited number of scholars have conducted specialized research on cultural differences, cross-cultural management, and the systematic application of multiculturalism in public governance. University cross-cultural governance systems often suffer from the pitfalls of universalist illusions and one-way discipline. To address the shortcomings of traditional models, some scholars have employed classical cultural dimension theories (such as Hofstede's cultural values dimension system [4] and Hall's high-low context theory [12]) as analytical tools, proposing that support for university international governance should be provided through collaboration among multiple stakeholders, cultural training, and organizational conflict mediation [4][12].

However, there is limited literature specifically examining international student management from cultural sensitivity or governance integration perspectives, making it a marginal area within the broader discourse on international student management and university governance [1]. Methodologically, existing studies predominantly employ empirical summaries, qualitative case analyses, or localized questionnaire surveys [1], yet their sample selection often exhibits temporal, regional, and small-scale characteristics [1]. Most research focuses on the adaptation of international students already enrolled at leading universities in developed eastern regions [1], while overlooking the agency of international students across different institutional tiers, geographical contexts, and those residing on campus peripheries or within specific student organizations [1].

More critically, the current international student management system established by academia merely represents corrective measures addressing specific public resource conflicts or administrative loopholes [1], without genuinely integrating macro governance theory with micro-level cross-cultural management theory—resulting in two largely parallel dimensions with minimal intersection. The absence of a comprehensive approach focusing on systemic integration of social support and paradigm reconstruction has led to fragmented, one-way administrative controls implemented by various stakeholders rather than interactive collaboration [1], thereby failing to develop actionable guidance frameworks for cultural translation [1]. Future research must overcome limitations such as insufficient studies, simplistic methodologies, theoretical fragmentation, and lack of interactivity [1], achieving a paradigm shift from "disembodied" control to "embodied" understanding [1], thereby enhancing the effectiveness, precision, and humanistic dimension of university internationalization governance systems [1].

III. The Epistemological Position and Speculative Logic of the Study

This paper falls within the realm of pure theoretical research, aiming to address the deficiencies in theoretical explanatory power and practical failures in international governance for international students at universities through critical literature analysis and philosophical reflection. Our analytical framework draws on the intersection of constructivist and situationalist philosophies, positing that governance is a process of continuous reshaping through cultural interaction, with its effectiveness largely determined by how well rules align with specific cultural contexts rather than by their universal applicability. Consequently, this study does not test established hypotheses using empirical samples; instead, it follows a "critical-reconstruction-construction" approach to conduct a philosophical exploration of the essence of governance paradigms from an epistemological perspective.

Therefore, the study first conducts a critical examination of traditional governance and cross-cultural management theories, identifying their epistemological crisis of "cultural blindness" and practical limitations. Subsequently, through philosophical scrutiny, it proposes an epistemological reconstruction grounded in three foundational principles: starting from "cultural neutrality," moving toward "cultural embeddedness" (ontologically), progressing to "contextual adaptation" (methodologically), and ultimately adopting an "inclusivity-oriented" approach (value theoretically). Building upon these shifts, the paper constructs a theoretical framework comprising a three-dimensional model of "culture-sensitive governance" characterized by cultural cognition restructuring, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and institutional innovation alignment, while elucidating its underlying mechanisms. It should be noted that the real-world examples cited here serve not as empirical cases for testing the framework, but rather as illustrations demonstrating cultural tensions within actual contexts, thereby providing concrete explanations for abstract theoretical concepts.

(III) Theoretical Basis

This study endeavors to develop theoretical frameworks grounded in constructivist and contextualist philosophies. Constructivism posits that social reality is not objectively fixed but gradually constructed through social interactions, while culture is not an inherent essence but rather a process of continuous construction and reconstruction through cross-cultural engagement. This epistemological perspective provides a solid foundation for the "culture-sensitive governance" framework proposed in this paper, emphasizing that governance should not merely apply universal rules but rather evolve dynamically through cultural interactions. Contextualism highlights the situational nature of knowledge and practice, rejecting universally applicable, context-free rules. It argues that governance effectiveness depends not on the universality of rules but on their alignment with specific contexts. This methodological approach offers essential support for a culture-sensitive governance framework, requiring timely and dynamic adjustments to governance rules and institutions within the management environment of international students at universities in response to cultural contexts.

IV. Construction of the Theoretical Framework

Based on the aforementioned philosophical stance, this paper systematically elaborates on the theoretical framework of culturally sensitive governance. First, core concepts are defined; subsequently, the epistemological foundation of this framework—the triple paradigm shift—is discussed; then the three key dimensions within the culturally sensitive governance framework are examined in detail; finally, the intrinsic logic and operational mechanisms among these dimensions are analyzed to highlight its distinctiveness and innovativeness.

(1) Definition of "Culturally Sensible Governance"

Culturally sensitive governance is a governance model that integrates cultural factors into both the analysis and implementation of governance processes. It acknowledges and respects cultural diversity, treating culture as a core component rather than an external constraint; it emphasizes the context-dependent nature and cultural embeddedness of governance knowledge, opposing universalized norms divorced from practical contexts; it advocates participatory, dialogic, and consultative approaches among stakeholders, relying on cross-cultural communication and dialogue to achieve consensus; furthermore, it requires all governance actors to possess cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural competence, enabling them to identify, understand, and adapt to cultural differences, thereby fostering dynamic alignment between cross-cultural governance principles and the cultural

environment. This definition comprehensively encompasses four key dimensions—ontology, epistemology, methodology, and practice—forming a well-rounded conceptual framework.

(II) As a paradigm crisis within the framework of technological governance dilemmas

The current challenges in governing the group of international students at universities, to some extent, stem from the overreach of instrumental rationality onto cultural subjectivity under the technocratic paradigm. This governance logic is deeply influenced by the efficiency-first approach of New Public Management (NPM), which reduces educational governance to a decontextualized, mechanical management process, thereby giving rise to profound cognitive and practical crises. These issues manifest specifically in the following aspects:

The technologicalist governance logic often falls into the ontological illusion of "cultural neutrality," thereby giving rise to a form of "cultural blindness." The traditional model presupposes a set of student governance rules based on Western rationalism, universality, and neutrality, arrogantly assuming their universal applicability in the absence of China's indigenous cultural context [13]. The assumption of cultural neutrality obscures the fact that governance systems are essentially projections of specific values, leaving international student administrators vulnerable to interpretive poverty when confronted with multicultural impacts due to a lack of consideration for the profound cultural logic of the "other." This ontological blindness ultimately manifests as an inability to recognize foreign heterogeneous cultures and further erodes the capacity of China's indigenous cultural subjectivity for "meaning translation," rendering contextualized interpretations of local institutional logic prone to becoming mere administrative disciplines devoid of cultural warmth.

Secondly, universal rules exhibit strong permeability in methodology, thereby giving rise to phenomena of meaning rupture in the governance process. When universities apply decontextualized rigid regulations to evaluate international students—individuals with profound heterocultural imprints—who are inherently "embodied," the efficacy of governance largely depends on the alignment of these rules with cross-cultural contexts rather than their inherent universality [14]. The absence of rigorous control over the medium of "translation" reduces China's unique social governance norms to cold administrative techniques and hinders their transformation into a sense of identity among international student subjects. Such "methodological violence" causes international student governance practices to oscillate between the antithesis of "strict control" and "leniency," failing to resolve cultural conflicts and instead distorting the original intent of educational management due to the decontextualization of rules.

Finally, under the value orientation of prioritizing management efficiency for international students, the ultimate outcome of traditional instrumental rationality is the creation of a distance between administrators and international students as two distinct entities. The ultimate goal of governance should be the comprehensive development of individuals, rather than being controlled by data and metrics [3]. The technocratic paradigm reduces international students to passive subjects under control, neglecting the essential nature of governance as a process of meaning construction. Moreover, due to the lack of co-building mechanisms grounded in China's "harmonious culture," dialogic rationality within the governance framework for international student communities has been replaced by monologue-style discourse. This disconnect between the real world and the realm of meaning ultimately leads to frequent inefficiencies in international student governance and the erosion of administrative legitimacy.

(3) The logical framework of the dialectical unity among cognition, subjectivity, and institutions

Based on the aforementioned threefold paradigm shift, this paper attempts to construct and reconstruct a three-dimensional logical framework of "culture-sensitive governance" (Figure 1), with its logical starting point being the "cognitive translation" imbued with China's subjectivity. It posits that administrators should ground their approach in China's contemporary national conditions, legal system, and campus regulations, and translate these elements to international students in a culture-sensitive manner—namely, transforming local logic into situational rationality. This process further fosters discourse consensus among middle-level stakeholders, achieving consistency in core values and flexibility in implementation at the institutional level. Consequently, this framework encompasses three primary dimensions: cultural cognition reconstruction (cognitive foundation), multi-stakeholder collaboration (organizational mechanisms), and institutional innovation adaptation (institutional safeguards). These dimensions are not isolated but form a progressive logical chain characterized by deepening interconnections from the core to the periphery, involving dynamic adjustment and reflective feedback—a continuous cycle where the three aspects of "why," "who," and "how" mutually influence, support, and reinforce each other.

1. Dimension 1: Reconstructing cultural cognition as a prerequisite

The reconstruction of cultural cognition, to a certain extent, has also brought about a fundamental transformation in the cognitive approaches and frameworks of governance actors regarding cultural differences. It requires a shift from a single cultural perspective to a multicultural one, and from neglecting cultural disparities to cultivating cultural sensitivity. This paper argues that such cognitive reconstruction is bidirectional and mutually beneficial: on one hand, it necessitates maintaining humility and respect for the cultural backgrounds of international students; on the other hand, it demands upholding and highlighting the cultural subjectivity of China, firmly anchoring "China's national conditions education" within China's governance logic. We believe it is essential at this stage to view national conditions education as a profound mechanism of "cross-cultural translation" —international students as governance actors should not treat it merely as administrative, one-way knowledge dissemination or reduce it to defensive measures against public opinion, but rather transform it into a deep-level academic public service that helps international students understand China and grasp the underlying logic of China's governance. The fundamental principles governing modern Chinese society should be promptly conveyed to international students through explicit and implicit curricula, converting the legitimacy of rules within the Chinese context into situational rationality that they can comprehend. This process involves both the accumulation of knowledge and an awakening of wisdom—namely, the need to flexibly adapt cognitive frameworks in cross-cultural environments to achieve the mutual reinforcement of "holistic thinking" and "analytical thinking" as described by Nisbett [15]. This process can be divided into three levels: cultural awareness awakening (recognizing the existence of differences), cultural understanding deepening (exploring the causes of differences), and cultural wisdom enhancement (mastering cultural intelligence CQ). Only when governance actors achieve a dual reconstruction of understanding—embodying both cultural self-awareness rooted in local traditions and empathy toward other cultures—can they avoid judging others through conventional, singular cultural standards, thereby laying the cognitive foundation for subsequent collaboration, exchange, and adaptation.

2. Dimension 2: Collaboration among multiple stakeholders as the vehicle for action

The significance of multi-stakeholder collaborative governance lies in addressing the lack of diverse participants inherent in traditional governance models. This approach advocates for equal participation and joint governance by various stakeholders, including the government, universities, faculty members, international students, and social organizations. By establishing cross-cultural governance committees, creating platforms for international student engagement, and promoting consultative democracy, international students are transformed from passive "management subjects" into active "governance actors." In a sense, this represents not merely a sharing of power but also a reconfiguration of intersubjectivity. Key elements include the diversity and representativeness of governance stakeholders, equality and substantive participation among all parties, as well as a collaborative dialogue framework. Consequently, the governance process involving international students must adhere to principles of equal dialogue and consultation, rather than relying solely on unilateral directives or coercive measures.

Cultural cognition reconstruction is not an independent process separate from the subject's engagement, but rather the internal driving force behind its genuine operation. The enhancement of managers' cultural intelligence (CQ) goes beyond individual cognitive self-improvement; it lies in their ability to identify, decode, and respond to the cultural logic of "the other." Only when governance actors possess this capacity can dialogue previously confined within distinct cultural frameworks evolve from formal "presence" to substantive "intercommunication." In other words, cultural intelligence builds a bridge for meaningful exchange among diverse stakeholders, enabling managers to promptly discern underlying needs behind high-and low-context expressions, and transform misunderstandings or conflicts arising during negotiations into mutually acceptable requirements.

However, cognitive-level facilitation alone is insufficient to sustain collaborative dynamics stably. Differences between Chinese and international students in value systems, communication habits, and perceptions of rights inherently create tension in dialogue: direct expressions of demands may be perceived as offensive, while subtle reservations could be misinterpreted as acquiescence, and the ideal of equal participation may easily collapse into a lack of shared agency due to cultural disparities. Thus, reconstructing inter-subjectivity requires not only individual goodwill and capability but also institutional support and institutionalization. This reflects the inherent progression from "subjective collaboration" to "institutional alignment": the dialogic potential unleashed by cultural intelligence must be transformed through institutional innovation into stable procedural frameworks—by explicitly formalizing negotiation rules, deliberative processes, and conflict resolution mechanisms. This enables cross-cultural understanding among individuals to evolve into a sustainable, replicable organizational capacity, preventing governance from becoming subject to personal biases or situational fluctuations. Consequently, cognition, collaboration, and alignment do not exist as mere parallel elements but form a progressive chain that progresses from capabilities to relationships and ultimately to structural foundations.

3. Dimension 3: Institutional Innovation Adaptation

"Institutional innovation adaptation" largely adheres to the institutional logic of "core unity and flexibility at the periphery." It requires administrators to innovate and adjust specific governance rules and operational methods based on distinct cultural contexts between China and other countries, while upholding core values (human dignity, spirit of rule of law) and fundamental principles (safety baseline, academic integrity). When addressing behavioral deviations arising from cultural differences, a cross-cultural mediation approach should be adopted rather than relying solely on punitive measures, thereby achieving a balance between institutional rigidity and cultural flexibility. This dimension examines the bidirectional adaptability of international student management systems: international students must comply with university regulations, while these systems must accommodate cultural diversity by providing space for cross-cultural governance.

The distinctive nature of this institutional logic becomes particularly evident through the comparative analysis presented in Table 1. The "Institutional Logic" column reveals that traditional governance theory emphasizes universal rules and uniform standards, while multicultural governance prioritizes differentiated rights and tailored protections—each approach representing distinct yet complementary perspectives. Cultural-sensitive governance, however, advocates for a balanced integration of core unity, practical flexibility, and context-specific adaptability, transcending the simplistic dichotomy between universality and diversity. It maintains institutional rigidity through unified core values while granting cultural flexibility through adaptive implementation strategies. This three-dimensional framework (from core principles to superficial dimensions) in Figure 1 provides a theoretical framework for understanding institutional logic, with innovation adaptation serving as the ultimate manifestation of this principle at the institutional level and defining what sets cultural-sensitive governance apart from other paradigms.

(IV) Theoretical Comparison and Contextual Interpretation

To demonstrate the explanatory power and innovativeness of a culturally sensitive governance framework, it is essential to ground abstract theoretical concepts in the vibrant realm of reality. Therefore, this section first attempts to elucidate the uniqueness of culturally sensitive governance through systematic theoretical comparisons; secondly, it analyzes representative real-world scenarios from China's university internationalization governance in recent years. These are not isolated administrative events but rather geological faults arising from conflicts between cultural logic and institutional logic. From these fault lines, one can roughly discern the potential for the rupture of traditional governance paradigms and the emergence of new ones. They are not presented here as empirical samples for testing but rather as speculative examples intended to provide contextualized theoretical interpretations of real-world tensions.

1. Theoretical Comparison: The Uniqueness and Innovation of Culture-Sensitive Governance

To better demonstrate the theoretical innovations of culturally sensitive governance, this paper conducts a systematic comparison across eight dimensions—including traditional governance theory, multiculturalism-based governance theory, cross-cultural management theory, and new public governance theory (see Table 1).

Table 1 Comparison of Culture-Sensitive Governance and Related Theories

Comparison Dimension	Traditional Governance Theory	Multiculturalism-based governance	Cross-cultural Management Theory	New Theory of Public Governance	Culture-sensitive governance
Epistemological Hypothesis	Cultural neutrality, rational homogeneity	Cultural diversity and normative orientation	Cultural differences, tool-oriented approaches	Network collaboration; Structure-oriented approach	Cultural embeddedness, context-oriented approach
Cultural Perspective	Cultural blindness (culture as an external constraint)	Static Cultural View (Culture as a fixed attribute)	A dimensionalized view of culture (culture as a measurable variable)	Cultural neglect (focusing on structure rather than culture)	The Dynamic Cultural Perspective (Culture as a Process of Construction)
Governance Entity	Government officials and university administrators	Government, universities, and representatives of ethnic minorities	Managers, Employees	Government, universities, and social organizations	Government agencies, universities, teachers, Chinese and international students, social organizations
Governance Mechanism	Bureaucratic structure, command-and-control system	Recognition and Inclusion Policy	Cultural Training, Conflict Management	Network collaboration and cooperative governance	Reconstruction of cultural cognition, collaboration among multiple stakeholders, and adaptation of institutional innovation
power relation	Hierarchical, Unidirectional Management	Recognition of the rights of minority groups	Management-led approach	Multicenter, networked	Equal participation, dialogue, and consultation
Value Orientation	Efficiency-oriented approach	Guidance towards fairness (normativity)	Performance-oriented (instrumental)	Collaborative Guidance	Inclusivity-oriented approach (value rationality)
Systematic Logic	Universal rules and unified standards	Differential rights; special protections	Cultural Adaptation Training	Institutionalized Participation Mechanisms	Core unity, specific flexibility, and context-appropriate adaptability
applicable scene	A homogeneous cultural environment	Political governance in a multi-ethnic state	Organizational Management of Multinational Companies	Multiple sources of public service provision	International and multicultural governance in higher education institutions

As shown in Table 1, culturally sensitive governance demonstrates five key theoretical innovations. The major epistemological breakthrough lies in the fundamental shift from cultural neutrality to cultural embeddedness. The cultural perspective innovation moves beyond static, instrumental views by adopting a dynamic, constructivist

approach. Subject expansion positions international students as core participants in governance, emphasizing their right to participation. The proposed three-dimensional integration framework encompasses cognition, collaboration, and adaptation. The institutional logic of "core unity, specific flexibility, and context-appropriate adaptability" overcomes the binary opposition between universal rules and differentiated rights.

In this sense, culturally sensitive governance posits that security governance must undergo a shift from physical containment to cultural interpretation. The legitimacy of governance stems not from coercion but from understanding; when enforcing rules, the approach should evolve from mere prohibition to meaningful explanation. Taking the dormitory management systems in some universities as an example, the traditional model often treats them as one-way physical discipline, which can easily provoke resistance from international students 'sense of agency. From the perspective of culturally sensitive governance, administrators of international student affairs should rely on "national context translation" to reshape these systems into a "collective security contract" —that is, by leveraging the risk-sharing logic inherent in China's high-density campus environment, they should proactively explain how such distinctive systems positively contribute to protecting individual privacy and personal safety. This "meaning translation," grounded in the governance logic of Chinese universities and society, can partially address issues of cross-cultural cognitive dissonance, enabling international students to achieve contextualized acceptance of the rules after understanding China's national conditions.

2. The Game of Rights and Interests in Fair Governance: From "Concerns About Privilegization" to "Substantive Equity"

In recent years, public criticism of international student affairs in universities has primarily focused on the potential risks associated with privilege privileges. When local students perceive disparities in accommodation conditions and admission requirements for international students as a form of relative deprivation, dissatisfaction often arises. Without proper intervention, this can easily lead to interpersonal conflicts within the campus community.

The core issue lies in the governance authorities 'theoretical confusion regarding the relationship between "convergence" and "differentiation." Some scholars strongly advocate convergence, arguing that only fully uniform standards can eliminate doubts [7]. However, this approach actually falls into what is termed "formal equity." International students face structural disadvantages in areas such as language proficiency, social support networks, and cultural adaptation. Implementing rigid, context-free regulations across all dimensions would constitute a form of "reverse discrimination" against disadvantaged groups; conversely, excessive and indiscriminate preferential treatment could undermine local students' sense of fairness, leading to a symbolic misinterpretation of "privilege." This exemplifies the inherent contradiction in governance practices.

To address the aforementioned contradictions, culturally sensitive governance proposes a dialectical solution based on hierarchical governance. The first scenario involves homogenized resource allocation. In areas such as accommodation standards, water and electricity quotas, and scholarship evaluations—where resources are scarce—it is essential to implement uniform standards, eliminate privilege-based distinctions, and return to substantive equity through differentiation. This aligns with the principle of "balanced resource allocation" in educational equity [6]. Second, there should be differentiated developmental support. Greater investment should be made in supportive services for international students, including academic tutoring, psychological counseling, and language assistance. This constitutes developmental support rooted in compensatory justice rather than privilege. Third, institutional design must be concrete. By adopting the concept of "seeking common ground amidst differences," a comprehensive institutional framework should be established that combines a unified baseline (law, ethics, academic integrity) with appropriate flexibility (cultural context).

3. Organizational Failure in Collaborative Governance: The Dilemma of Cross-Cultural Communities

In many clubs composed of a mix of Chinese and international students, a peculiar cycle often emerges: initial enthusiasm is high, communication becomes obstructed midway, and ultimately China students take on all responsibilities while international students are marginalized. This is by no means an isolated case but rather a manifestation of widespread organizational failure, with the root cause lying in flawed design of social interaction mechanisms. The reasons cannot be simply attributed to language barriers; the deeper cause stems from the contradictions arising from Hall's High/Low Context Culture in micro-level organizational behavior [12]. The reserved and tactful expression style of China students contrast sharply with the direct and frank approach of European and American students, leading to significant communication distortions during decision-making. Collaborative governance, without cultural lubrication, easily degenerates into a highly inefficient organizational exercise with excessive internal friction.

How can we overcome such a predicament? We propose establishing explicit meta-rules to transform the unwritten practices in international student management into clear procedural guidelines and institutional regulations, cultivating cross-cultural "boundary-crossers" as translators and mediators, revitalizing inter-subjective dialogue within the cross-cultural context, and refocusing teacher-student collaboration on the core tasks at hand.

V. Discussion

This article aims to move beyond superficial approaches focused solely on addressing management shortcomings in the administration of international students at universities, and instead seeks to examine the essence of international governance from a cultural perspective. When analyzing complex campus conflicts involving international students through the lens of culturally sensitive governance, the core issue lies not in flaws in management techniques, but in the profound challenges inherent when confronting a heterogeneous reality.

(1) The Transgression and Return of Theory: A Philosophical Examination of Instrumental Rationality

For a long time, research on university governance has been trapped in the illusion of technological optimism. As Jin Shengjun warns, when education is reduced to a series of measurable and operational indicators and processes, human agency disappears from the educational landscape [3]. In international governance, the expansion of instrumental rationality is particularly pronounced, with administrators attempting to discipline vibrant, embodied cultural subjects using a set of universal, detached bureaucratic rules.

1. Deconstructing the epistemological myth of "cultural neutrality"

The most significant theoretical breakthrough of this study lies in refuting the underlying "cultural neutrality" hypothesis within traditional governance theory from a speculative perspective. Through logical deduction and contextual analysis, it concludes that in university settings characterized by intense symbolic interactions, there exists no purely governance issue independent of cultural context. So-called neutral rules essentially represent the naturalization and rationalization of dominant cultures' value preferences. By repositioning "culture" as an integral component of international governance rather than merely a peripheral interfering factor, this approach fundamentally rectifies epistemological misconceptions. It not only challenges the overconfidence of New Public

Management (NPM) in universalizing management techniques but also addresses the contemporary issue of how university education for international students can avoid becoming a "soulless machine."

2. Establishing a governance ethics based on "intersubjectivity"

While traditional governance focuses on control efficiency, culture-sensitive governance emphasizes the recognition of politics. The "cognition, collaboration, adaptation" framework proposed in this study fundamentally aims to reshape intersubjective interaction. This framework largely rejects the assumption that international students are mere "objects" requiring assimilation or correction, instead acknowledging their independent world of meaning as autonomous subjects. This shift in perspective transforms governance theory from a unidirectional "monologue" to a multidirectional "dialogue." Consequently, culture-sensitive governance can be regarded both as a management paradigm and an ethical stance—one that recognizes the legitimacy of differences and seeks coexistence within them.

(II) Anxiety and Breakthrough in Practice

The redefinition of theory inevitably leads to shifts in practice. For frontline managers, this article does not aim to provide a ready-to-use operational manual, but rather extends an invitation to reshape their professional practices. The three-dimensional framework of culture-sensitive governance offers practitioners comprehensive approaches spanning cognition, organization, and institutional levels, with specific strategies summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Matrix of Practical Application Strategies for Culture-Sensitive Governance

Governance Sector	The Dilemma of Traditional Models	Culture-Sensitive Governance Strategies
International Student Affairs Management (Enrollment, Housing, Academic Affairs)	One-way rule dissemination and rigid systems trigger conflicts, while overlooking underlying academic difficulties.	Bidirectional adaptation: Establish a dialogue-based orientation program; implement dormitory management characterized by "core consistency and flexible flexibility"; develop a diversified academic support system that includes cultural adaptation assistance.
Mediation of Cross-Cultural Conflicts	The administrative department's unilateral decision lacks cultural understanding and merely addresses symptoms rather than root causes.	Dialogue-based mediation: Establish a specialized mediation body composed of cross-cultural experts; adopt a "facilitator" -centred rather than "judges" -centric mediation approach; and establish conflict early warning and prevention mechanisms.
International students participate in governance processes.	International students are treated as passive "objects," lacking both channels and opportunities for participation.	By empowering stakeholders, we establish institutionalized mechanisms for international student participation (including representative assemblies and advisory committees), enhance their governance capabilities through training programs, and support the creation of cross-cultural student organizations.

1. The Identity Transformation from "Regulator" to "Interpretator"

In traditional governance frameworks, the role of administrators is typically fixed as that of rule enforcers and order maintainers. However, given the frequent occurrence of heterogeneous cultural conflicts among international student

groups, such role definitions prove inadequate. Cultural-sensitive governance demands that administrators shift from being controllers to interpreters of meaning. This implies that the core competence of governing international student communities extends beyond merely enforcing regulations rigidly; it requires cross-cultural translation skills—both translating the institutional logic inherent in China's higher education systems to international students so they understand the cultural legitimacy behind the rules, and conveying their cultural concerns to university decision-makers regarding student management policies to ensure these are incorporated into regulatory designs. Bidirectional interpretation remains the sole pathway to eliminating misunderstandings and fostering consensus.

2. Overcoming the lazy governance mindset rooted in rigid, context-free disciplinary practices

In practice, managers often resort to simplistic, rigid disciplinary measures that disregard contextual variations due to a narrow understanding of fairness or considerations of administrative costs. While seemingly effective, this approach represents a form of governance complacency. The dimensions of institutional innovation proposed in this paper require meticulous governance wisdom akin to dissecting a sparrow to address them effectively. On one hand, managers must establish detailed regulations concerning students' core rights (such as scholarship evaluations and disciplinary actions) that can withstand cross-cultural fairness scrutiny; on the other hand, sufficient cultural flexibility should be provided to international students in non-core areas like daily life. However, this inevitably complicates management processes. As educator John Dewey emphasized, the essence of education lies in complex development [16]; thus, any attempt to simplify it inevitably comes at the expense of educational quality.

3. Implement a "cultural translation" -oriented mechanism for integrating China-specific national conditions education

We believe that the practice of governing international students should not merely rely on traditional one-way indoctrination but rather establish a new governance model centered on cognitive translation and guided by hermeneutics. It is particularly important to emphasize that the so-called "national conditions education" here should not be narrowly confined to a curious introduction of ancient China's culture or historical symbols, but rather focus on helping international students understand the more contemporary question of "why China is what it is." In short, this education encompasses at least four interconnected levels of understanding: first, the history of China's modernization—how China has forged a unique path of modernization distinct from the West through its interaction with external cultures; second, China's modern social governance model—a governance framework combining Party leadership, government guidance, and participation from multiple stakeholders, underpinned by a people-centered value orientation; third, China's economic and social development trajectory since the reform and opening-up—including the transition from planned economy to market economy and from isolation to openness, as well as the dialectical balance between efficiency and fairness in the socialist market economy; and fourth, establishing governance rules based on contemporary national conditions enables international students to truly grasp the institutional roots of campus regulations' legitimacy, rather than treating them as isolated administrative directives.

Taking examples such as the "curfew in dormitories" and "control of high-power electrical appliances" in campus safety governance, traditional interpretations often treat these measures as administrative commands, which can easily provoke resistance from international students who advocate absolute personal freedom. By adopting a culture-sensitive governance framework, administrators need to employ the cultural translation mechanism of China to reframe such rules within the profound logic of "group-individual relationships" inherent in modern Chinese social governance. This logic draws on both the roots of traditional "harmonious culture" and new institutional forms

emerging during modernization; the advocated concept of "harmony" does not entail mere conformity or suppression but rather represents a dynamic balance and harmonious coexistence between individual rights and collective well-being—a approach emphasizing mutual benefit, reciprocity, and mutual respect. Administrators should actively explain to international students that in China's highly densely populated university living environments, the "high-power appliance control system" is essentially a collective security agreement rooted in the wisdom of "unity between group and individual," defining the boundaries of personal rights exercise—namely, that individual freedom must not come at the expense of others' safety space.

Furthermore, the perspective of national conditions education should not be confined solely within the confines of campus walls; it should guide international students to understand China from a broader perspective. Currently, China is actively participating in global governance through the concept of a "community with a shared future for mankind," pursuing win-win outcomes while respecting the diversity of civilizations. Translating this concept into the context of student governance means that the attitude toward heterogeneous cultures itself represents a concrete manifestation of this philosophy at the micro-level of the campus environment, requiring us to approach students from different cultural backgrounds with mutual respect and a spirit of mutual benefit. The process of cultural translation involves transforming macro-level governance values into micro-level "contextual rationality." By modernizing the logic of China's social governance and interpreting cultural wisdom such as "harmony in diversity" in a contemporary context, we can not only alleviate the coldness of institutional management but also enable international students to achieve a profound shift—from mere physical presence to cultural empathy—when understanding China's developmental path and underlying governance principles. This ultimately fosters an effective transition from a state of "heteronomy" to one of "autonomy" in their psychological framework.

(3) Research Limitations and Future Prospects

However, when the ideal governance paradigm was initially constructed, it also exhibited significant shortcomings. Although this paper aims to establish a coherent system, understanding cultural psychology remains highly challenging at the micro-level of international student governance, given that culture itself is a fluid and elusive concept. Secondly, the study primarily relies on pure philosophical reflection and logical reasoning; its conclusions are not intended to provide replicable operational procedures but rather to achieve a paradigmatic clarification from an epistemological perspective. How to provide more nuanced contextualized interpretations of this speculative framework across different types of universities and geographical environments requires further theoretical exploration. Additionally, the theoretical foundation of this research primarily stems from the localization theory of international student governance in China, whose applicability in other countries (or regions) necessitates additional cross-civilizational and cross-institutional comparative analyses.

Looking ahead, a more theoretically compelling issue may be how, amid profound changes in the global geopolitical landscape, we can break free from passive acceptance and mechanical imitation of Western governance discourses. From the perspective of China's cultural subjectivity, it is essential to establish a "China-specific international governance discourse system for higher education" that can interpret local experiences and engage in global educational governance dialogues. This is neither merely a matter of governance techniques nor a grand proposition concerning discourse power and civilizational mutual learning. Meanwhile, as artificial intelligence technology increasingly permeates university governance frameworks, a new question emerges: when intelligent agents, data profiling, and algorithmic recommendations become more prevalent in managing international student affairs, will technology subtly reinforce instrumental rationality's disembedding discipline over individuals? How can digital intelligent technologies serve as mediators for cross-cultural understanding and embodied empathy among faculty

and students—rather than becoming new tools for surveillance and discipline? This represents a fundamental challenge that culturally sensitive governance must address in the age of intelligence.

VI. Conclusion

In the process of globalization, the internationalization of higher education has shifted from "scale expansion" to "substantive development," and the theory of educational international governance is undergoing a transformation from "technological control" to "reflective practice." The "culture-sensitive governance" framework proposed in this paper does not aim to create a universal formula applicable to all management contexts; rather, it seeks to forge a path toward humanistic understanding beyond the rigid confines of instrumental rationality.

We must acknowledge that the traditional governance paradigm—a bureaucratic model based on cultural stereotypes and biases, masquerading as "cultural neutrality" —has become increasingly inadequate in addressing the complex challenges posed by diverse cultures. When university administrators apply uniform standards to evaluate international students, they not only trigger cross-cultural conflicts but also fundamentally distort the purpose of international education. As repeatedly discussed throughout this article, genuine governance crises stem not from institutional flaws, but from our diminished capacity to perceive the "other" and foreign cultures [17]. Thus, culturally sensitive governance holds significance not only for enhancing cross-cultural management effectiveness, but more importantly for advocating an ethical approach to cultural differences. In short:

First, governance is essentially "recognition." It is not a meaningless or blind cultural compromise; rather, it involves "translating" the logic of national conditions based on affirming the cultural subjectivity of China, enabling international students to develop profound cultural resonance when understanding China's institutions. In the multicultural context of university student management, the primary task of governance is not merely to impose discipline but to identify the unique aspects of foreign cultures that are obscured by universal rules and to recognize marginalized demands that have been overlooked within mainstream discourse systems. Therefore, only when recognition and understanding are achieved does the management order acquire moral legitimacy.

Second, governance is dialogue. We must be vigilant against monologue-style management approaches and instead shift our management approach toward a rational dialogue grounded in mutual understanding and respect. This means that the formulation of management rules is no longer merely a unilateral exercise of managerial authority but rather a process of exchange between cultural perspectives. Although this process may encounter numerous challenges, it remains the essential path to realizing a genuine community of rights for international students in China's higher education institutions.

Third, governance is accompanied by "reflection." As discussed earlier, the advocated culturally sensitive governance framework requires administrators of international students to maintain a "epistemologically humble" attitude—constantly reflecting on the limitations of their cultural perspectives and identifying biases and preconceptions inherent in existing student management systems and rule designs. This reflective approach [18] may serve as the final line of defense against administrative practices for international students descending into mediocrity.

Fourth, translation is what governance truly requires. Administrators of international students should not merely focus on simple knowledge transmission but should treat education about China's national conditions as a profound process of cultural translation. This means that in modern practices of student governance, administrators serve not only as enforcers of management rules but also as "translators" of China's modern social governance and operational logic. It is essential to transform the abstract concept of China's distinctive national conditions into situational rationality that international students can comprehend, enabling them to understand the historical context

and unique cultural logic underlying China's society and university governance systems. Of course, this does not involve imposition or forced indoctrination; rather, it entails providing students from diverse backgrounds with necessary cognitive maps based on considerations of China's varied universities and the specific environments and circumstances of individual students. This approach helps international students from different countries gradually overcome behavioral misalignments arising from cultural misunderstandings and achieve a transition from "physical presence" to "psychological presence" by understanding the contemporary cultural logic of Chinese universities.

Therefore, this study further concretizes the aforementioned ethical considerations into governance practices: transforming the "two-way adaptive mediation" managed by international students into "dialogical negotiation" for conflict resolution, followed by "subject empowerment" involving student participation, and integrating it with a "logical translation" of China's national context. The shift from rigid control to a flexible governance paradigm not only represents an attempt to continuously mitigate cross-cultural friction arising from individual rules within institutionalized participation mechanisms but also aims to integrate meaningful contemporary "China stories" into the details of international student governance, thereby transforming students from passive objects of management into proactive subjects capable of understanding modern China.

In summary, the exploration by universities of core issues in international governance for international students can be viewed as an investigation into the feasibility of cross-cultural education in China's higher education institutions amidst a century of profound transformations. This paradigm shift not only addresses specific challenges in student governance within China's modernization context but also, in a sense, provides micro-practical and theoretical support for the grand vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind. It offers valuable insights for exploring a more inclusive, compassionate, and flexible path toward coexistence based on respect for cultural diversity.

Declarations

Ethical Approval

This study is a purely theoretical and qualitative conceptual research focusing on paradigm reconstruction of culturally sensitive governance in higher education internationalization, adopting a critical philosophical perspective for theoretical analysis and speculative discussion. No human participants, field investigations, human-related experiments or empirical human-subject researches are involved in the entire research process. Therefore, ethical approval was not required for this study. This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent

This research solely conducts theoretical speculation, conceptual interpretation and paradigm innovation on higher education internationalization governance, without any involvement or recruitment of human subjects. Thus, informed consent is not applicable to this study. This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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Author Contribution

SU Qingwei conceived the study, developed the theoretical framework, and wrote the main manuscript text. TWNG Yongqing provided the critical philosophical perspective, conducted the literature critique, and co-authored the theoretical arguments. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

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Figures

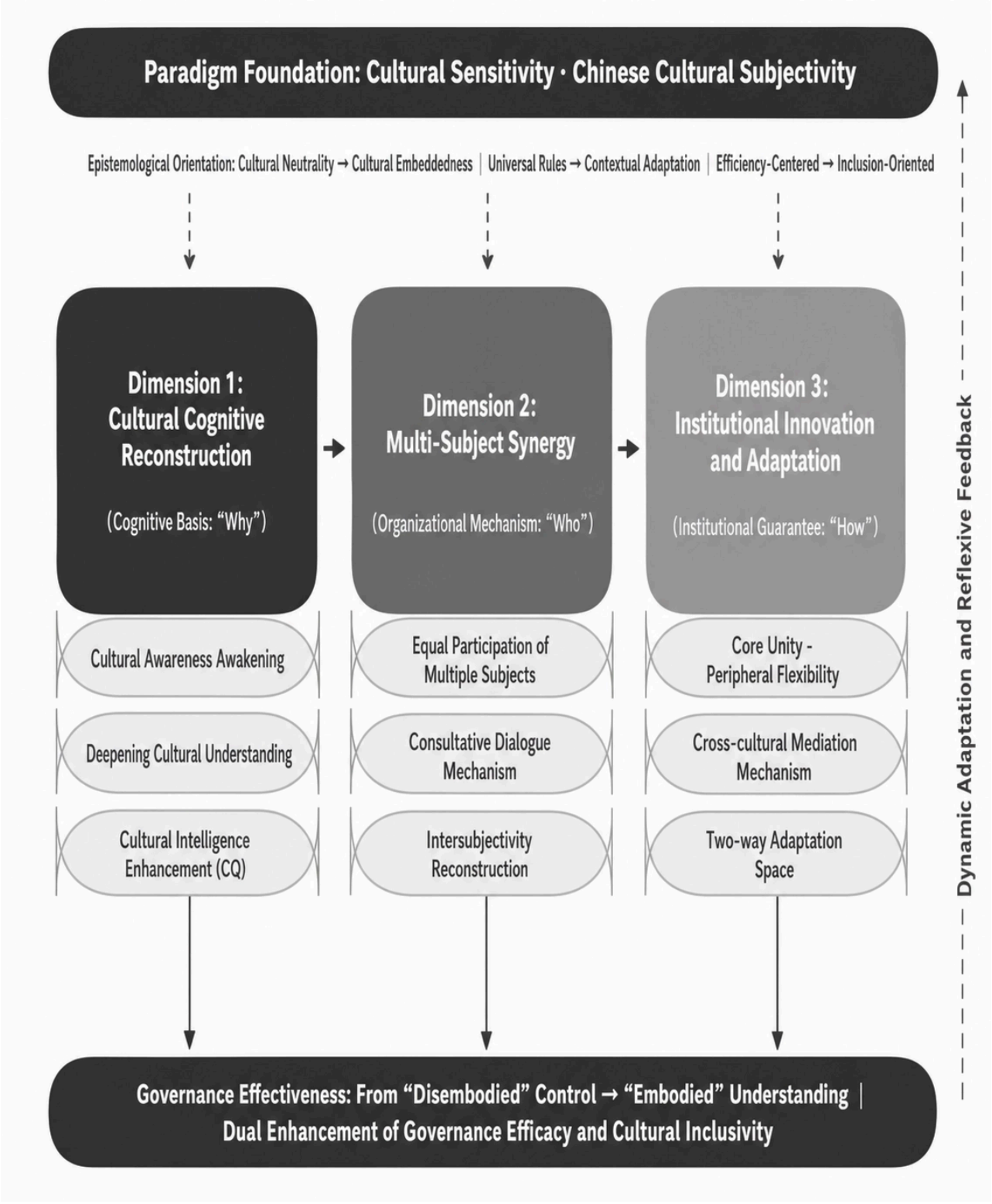


Figure 1

The three-dimensional logical framework of culture-sensitive governance