

ЕЗИКОЗНАНИЕ И МЕТОДИКА НА ОБУЧЕНИЕТО

LINGUISTICS AND TEACHING METHODOLOGY

FOREIGN TEACHERS AS CULTURAL MEDIATORS IN CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION: A MULTILINGUAL CASE STUDY OF EUROPEAN LANGUAGE FACULTY AT BEIJING INTERNATIONAL STUDIES UNIVERSITY

Yujia FAN

Beijing International Studies University, China

E-mail: fyj1988@163.com

ABSTRACT: This qualitative case study explores the cultural mediation role of foreign faculty in Chinese higher education. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 20 multilingual European-language instructors at the School of European Studies, Beijing International Studies University, it examines how foreign educators foster cross-cultural understanding through teaching and daily interactions. The findings identify three core mechanisms of cultural mediation: systematic cultural comparison in classroom instruction, informal transnational cultural communication with home-country networks, and strategic use of Chinese language proficiency to bridge cultural divides. Importantly, this mediating function persists after teachers return to their home countries. The study also reveals that instructors across all European languages face similar challenges and that adaptability and Chinese language competence are vital to effective cultural mediation. This research enriches the literature on cultural mediation in higher education and offers practical implications for managing international faculty in multilingual university settings. Although conducted in the Chinese context, these three mechanisms of cultural mediation are applicable to the teaching of European languages across various educational settings. The findings also provide a reference for future comparative research on foreign faculty in different linguistic and cultural environments.

KEYWORDS: cultural mediation; foreign faculty; intercultural communication; European languages; Chinese higher education; multilingual education; cultural bridge

1. Introduction

The internationalization of Chinese higher education has brought a growing number of foreign teachers to university campuses. Beyond language instruction, these educators are uniquely positioned to act as cultural mediators between China and their home countries. However, existing scholarship has largely centered on the teaching adaptation and acculturation challenges of foreign faculty, while their cultural mediation role remains under-researched. The School of European Studies (SES) at Beijing International Studies University (BISU) provides an ideal research site. Established in 2018 through a merger of three predecessor schools, SES is among China's most comprehensive European-language teaching units. Following a 2020 internal restructuring, it comprises five interdisciplinary departments offering 18 European languages, including major languages such as Russian, German, French, and Spanish, alongside less-commonly taught languages like Bulgarian, Serbian, Slovenian, and Lithuanian. The school also has a dedicated

foreign affairs officer position responsible for foreign teacher management, faculty and student study abroad programs, and international cooperation. This distinctive multilingual environment enables the investigation of how foreign teachers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds contribute to intercultural dialogue.

This study addresses two research questions:

- 1) How do foreign teachers perceive and enact their cultural mediation role?
- 2) What strategies do they employ to enhance cross-cultural understanding?

While this study is situated within the Chinese higher education context, its findings on the cultural mediation mechanisms have broader relevance for European language instruction in other countries. The three identified strategies—systematic cultural comparison, transnational informal communication, and strategic use of host language proficiency—are transferable across different educational settings. This cross-context applicability aligns with the international scope of *Linguarum Universe*.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Mediation Theory

Cultural mediation refers to the active process of interpreting, translating, and bridging different cultural systems. Cultural mediators do not simply connect two sides but actively explain contexts, select information, and reduce misunderstandings (Kim, 2001). In educational contexts, most research focuses on international students and study-abroad participants, while long-term foreign faculty have received limited attention.

2.2 Foreign Faculty in Chinese Higher Education

Existing studies mainly discuss recruitment, teaching adaptation, and cultural challenges of foreign teachers in China (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2017). As documented in recent empirical work, expatriate educators in Chinese universities face persistent bureaucratic and institutional obstacles that disrupt daily teaching practice (Duffy, 2025). The cross-cultural adjustment experienced by these overseas academics can be conceptualised via foundational acculturation theory proposed by Berry (1997). While recent research has begun to examine the evolving role of international faculty in China, their function as cultural mediators remains underexplored, particularly for instructors of less commonly taught European languages.

2.3 Research Gaps

Three gaps exist in the current literature: overemphasis on English-speaking teachers; insufficient attention to cultural mediation; and lack of retrospective views from former foreign teachers. This study fills these gaps by including multilingual European teachers and former faculty. In doing so, it responds to recent calls for more empirical research on cross-cultural adaptation of foreign language teachers (Wang & Bellamy, 2021) and the cultural brokerage role of expatriate academics working in Chinese higher education (Chen et al., 2022). Few prior works track the long-term cross-cultural outreach of expatriate educators after they depart China (Juusola & Rähkä, 2026).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design using semi-structured interviews. This qualitative design is appropriate for the scope of *Linguarum Universe*, which welcomes empirical studies on language, culture, and education.

3.2 Research Site

Fieldwork was conducted at the SES, BISU. SES employs 33 foreign faculty from 22 countries teaching 18 European languages, offering a rich context for exploring multilingual intercultural dynamics.

3.3 Participants

Twenty foreign teachers participated, including three former faculty. The sample includes 9 males and 11 females. Participants represent 19 European countries, teaching 18 languages (6 major European languages and 12 less-commonly taught languages), with teaching experience in China ranging from six months to 34 years.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

ID	Language	Language Type	Country	Gender	Birth Year	Years in China	Status
P 01	Italian	Major	Italy	M	1972	3	Current
P 02	Russian	Major	Russia	F	1971	7	Current
P 03	Albanian	LCTL	Albania	F	1959	34	Current
P 04	Serbian	LCTL	Serbia	F	1983	9	Current
P 05	Polish	LCTL	Poland	F	1973	0.5	Current
P 06	Romanian	LCTL	Romania	M	1976	9	Current
P 07	Hungarian	LCTL	Hungary	M	1988	5	Current
P 08	Slovak	LCTL	Slovakia	F	1996	2.5	Current
P 09	Bulgarian	LCTL	Bulgaria	M	1978	6	Current
P 10	Latvian	LCTL	Latvia	F	1993	0.5	Current
P 11	Estonian	LCTL	Estonia	F	1967	0.5	Current
P 12	Czech	LCTL	Czech Republic	F	1978	8	Current
P 13	Portuguese	Major	Portugal	M	1984	9	Current
P 14	French	Major	France	F	1986	11	Current
P 15	Spanish	Major	Spain	F	1988	3	Current
P 16	French	Major	Belgium	M	1980	6	Current
P 17	German	Major	Germany	M	1986	7	Current
P 18	Lithuanian	LCTL	Lithuania	F	1993	4	Former
P 19	Slovenian	LCTL	Slovenia	M	1987	3	Former
P 20	Serbian	LCTL	Serbia	M	1982	6	Former

Note: LCTL = Less-Commonly Taught Language

3.4 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in March and April 2026, each lasting 40-60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, generating approximately 160,000 words of interview data.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.6 Ethics

All participants provided informed consent. Anonymity was protected by using ID numbers instead of real names.

4. Findings

4.1 Cultural Mediator Identity

Most participants regarded themselves as cultural bridges or active cultural mediators between their home countries and China. A Bulgarian instructor (P09) noted that constant comparisons between Chinese and Bulgarian culture, literature, and history enable students to view Chinese culture from new perspectives. An Albanian teacher (P03) described herself as a connector, highlighting shared values such as respect for elders and care for children. An Italian instructor (P01) preferred the term “cultural mediator” rather than “bridge”, emphasizing active interpretation rather than passive connection. Several participants also saw themselves as correctors of misinformation, actively challenging stereotypes about China among friends and family abroad.

4.2 Cultural Comparison in Teaching

Foreign teachers regularly used comparative approaches to deepen student understanding, a widely adopted pedagogical strategy observed among European language native instructors in Chinese universities (Yao & Scolaro, 2025). A Serbian instructor (P04) compared Chinese and Serbian food, customs, and sentence structure in daily teaching. A Hungarian teacher (P07) placed Hungarian culture within a broader European framework rather than teaching in isolation. A former Serbian teacher (P20) used syntactic similarities—such as subject-omission in both Chinese and Serbian—to facilitate linguistic learning.

4.3 Relaxed and Inclusive Classroom Atmosphere

Many instructors built friendly and interactive learning environments. A former Serbian teacher (P20) brought snacks to ease tension; a Slovenian instructor (P19) used debate, collaborative problem-solving, and inclusive pedagogy instead of one-way lecturing.

4.4 Spreading Chinese Culture Abroad

Participants actively shared real-life experiences of China’s digital convenience, public transportation, and cultural events with overseas contacts. A Polish teacher (P05) showed photos and explained daily amenities such as Alipay and WeChat Pay. A Latvian teacher (P10) shared with her family the places and activities that were offered by BISU, like Chinese fashion show, Chinese opera. A Portugal teacher (P13) corrected misunderstandings about China in Western media and presented an authentic vision of Chinese society.

4.5 Continuing Influence of Former Faculty

Former instructors continued to promote China after returning home and used Chinese materials in their teaching. A Slovenian faculty member (P19) left in 2021 still speaks positively of Beijing and BISU, and expressed a goal to establish a people-to-people exchange center to strengthen cultural ties.

4.6 Chinese Language as a Mediation Tool

Chinese proficiency enhanced cultural understanding and instructional clarity. A Bulgarian

instructor (P09) stressed that learning Chinese is essential to grasping the foundations of Chinese culture. A former Serbian teacher (P20) used improved Chinese to explain grammar more effectively. A Czech sinologist (P12) taught directly in Chinese, enabling her to anticipate and correct student errors.

4.7 Students' Cultural Pride

Teachers observed strong cultural confidence among Chinese students, particularly in academic writing. An Albanian faculty member (P03) and an Italian faculty member (P01) both noted that students demonstrated growing awareness and pride in traditional Chinese culture.

4.8 Common Challenges Across Languages

All instructors, regardless of language type, faced similar constraints in material development and student engagement. One former Serbian teacher (P20) noted that all non-English foreign teachers must independently source supplementary materials, suggesting that adaptability matters more than language category.

4.9 Advice for New Foreign Teachers

Recommendations included professional expertise, respect, open-mindedness, relationship building, and pre-arrival learning about China. Instructors emphasized adaptability and local language learning as key to success.

5. Discussion

5.1 Three Mechanisms of Cultural Mediation

The study identifies three interrelated mechanisms of cultural mediation:

First, classroom-based cultural comparison using daily, literary, and linguistic examples; Second, transnational informal communication with home networks as unofficial cultural ambassadors; Third, Strategic use of Chinese proficiency to explain concepts and build connections.

Cultural mediation appears to exist on a continuum, ranging from sharing positive experiences to actively correcting misinformation, with preliminary evidence suggesting it deepens with experience and language ability. However, larger-scale studies are needed to confirm this pattern.

5.2 Long-Term Cultural Influence of Former Faculty

A key contribution is the finding that cultural mediation continues post-employment. Former teachers remain effective promoters of Chinese culture, creating long-term value for cultural diplomacy.

5.3 Language Differences and Adaptability

Contrary to assumptions that less-commonly taught language teachers face greater challenges, data indicate that individual adaptability is a more critical factor.

5.4 Practical Implications for University Management

Institutions should:

- Recognize and support the cultural mediation role of foreign faculty;
- Provide training on Chinese student characteristics and classroom culture;
- Maintain connections with former instructors as long-term cultural ambassadors.

6. Conclusion

This study provides preliminary evidence that foreign teachers at a multilingual Chinese university act as cultural mediators through three core mechanisms: systematic classroom

comparison, transnational informal communication, and strategic use of Chinese language skills. Their cultural mediation role persists after returning to their home countries. Adaptability and Chinese language competence are critical to effective practice, and instructors across all European languages face similar challenges. This study enriches cultural mediation theory in higher education and provides actionable guidance for international faculty management in multilingual universities. While limited to a single institution, this study offers a foundation for future cross-institutional and cross-national comparisons of foreign faculty's cultural mediation roles. Future research may explore institutional support structures and the long-term impacts of former foreign teachers.

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