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Artificial Intelligence as a Cultural Adaptation Scaffold: Experiences of Asian International Students at Chinese Universities

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Abstract

Growing international student mobility, particularly intra-Asian flows to China, has intensified the need to support Asian international students' cultural adaptation amid linguistic, academic, sociocultural, and psychological challenges. This study examines how artificial intelligence (AI) is used and perceived as a resource for such adaptation in Chinese higher education. Drawing on Berry's acculturation framework, Ward and Kennedy's dual-process model, and Deardorff's and Byram's intercultural competence theories, the study employed a qualitative interpretivist design. Semi-structured interviews with 37 Asian international students from 11 countries enrolled at five universities in Yunnan Province, China, were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Participants perceived AI as multidimensional adaptation scaffolding supporting academic adjustment, language mediation, sociocultural navigation, emotional well-being, and intercultural learning. They also reported challenges including misinformation, algorithmic bias, over-reliance and uneven AI literacy. Institutional factors—particularly the absence of clear policies, training and instructor guidance—further shaped how useful and safe they found AI to be. The study positions AI as a mediating resource in participants' reported acculturation experiences and proposes multidimensional adaptation scaffolding and the dependency paradox as sensitising concepts. It underscores the need for culturally responsive AI literacy initiatives and institutional support systems to maximise perceived benefits while mitigating reported risks in international higher education.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; international students; cultural adaptation; acculturation; intercultural competence; Chinese higher education; generative AI; AI literacy

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1. Introduction

UNESCO's (2025) report highlights the rapid transformation of international higher education, with global student mobility increasing from 2.3 million in 2000 to 6.9 million in 2023. This growth reflects expanding educational access while requiring adaptive systems to support increasingly diverse learners. Intra-Asian mobility has intensified, positioning countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore as major educational hubs (Hajar & Manan, 2026). China, driven partly by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has become a leading destination, hosting 380,000 international students from 191 countries and regions in 2024–2025, with Asian students representing the largest proportion (Shuo, 2026).

Despite geographical and cultural proximity, Asian international students face complex adaptation challenges involving academic adjustment, language barriers, cultural differences, psychological stress, limited support networks, and identity negotiation (Berry, 2005; Cao & Meng, 2022; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). These challenges may constrain academic achievement, well-being, and intercultural development, highlighting the need for holistic approaches to cultural adaptation.

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT 5.2, Claude 4.4, Grammarly 9.95.0, and intelligent tutoring systems have emerged as promising resources for supporting international students' adaptation. Recent studies suggest that AI may support academic learning, self-regulation, emotional support, and intercultural competence by helping students navigate linguistic, epistemological, and cultural differences (F. Li & Mohammad, 2025; H. Ma et al., 2025; Mao, 2024). In intra-Asian contexts such as China, AI may further facilitate reflexive learning and the development of mobility capital through language learning, skill acquisition, and intercultural engagement (Cairns, 2021a, 2021b).

However, research on AI-mediated cultural adaptation remains limited. Existing studies conceptualise AI as a tool for academic assistance or language learning, overlooking its broader cognitive, affective, and behavioural roles in adaptation processes (Chan & Hu, 2023; H. Ma et al., 2025). Moreover, scholarship often privileges Western mobility contexts while under-examining South–South educational flows and the distinctive adaptation experiences of Asian students in China (Hajar & Manan, 2026). Further research is therefore needed to understand how AI is used and perceived as an adaptive resource within non-Western higher education environments. This study is guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1. How do Asian international students at Chinese universities perceive and experience the role of AI tools in supporting their psychological, sociocultural, and academic adaptation, and what cognitive-affective processes do they describe as underlying these experiences?
RQ2. What are the primary barriers, challenges, and ethical concerns identified by Asian international students when using AI tools for cultural adaptation in the Chinese higher education context?
RQ3. How do Asian international students perceive institutional and environmental factors at Chinese universities as shaping their use of AI tools for developing intercultural competence and for negotiating their identities as international students?

Terminology note. Given the qualitative, interpretivist and cross-sectional design, terms such as "mechanisms", "mediation", and "facilitate" are used descriptively to refer to processes and pathways that participants reported. They do not denote statistical mediation or demonstrated causal effects. Statements about benefits, such as reduced anxiety or improved competence, refer to participants' perceptions and self-reports.

2. Literature Review

Acculturative challenges for Asian international students in China extend beyond relocation to include linguistic, academic, social, and psychological adjustment (H. Chen, 2025). Mandarin proficiency is a major obstacle because English rarely functions as a common language in everyday or academic settings, limiting communication and integration (Cao & Meng, 2022). Students must also adapt to unfamiliar educational practices, including teacher-centred instruction and high-stakes assessments, which often differ from learning traditions in their home countries and contribute to academic stress (Y. Liu, 2025; Mao, 2024). Social integration is further constrained by institutional arrangements such as segregated accommodation and limited interaction with domestic students, hindering intercultural engagement and identity development (An & Chiang, 2015; Xu et al., 2026). Acculturative stress commonly manifests as loneliness, homesickness, discrimination, and

reduced confidence, pointing to the need to support academic, sociocultural, and emotional well-being (Berry, 2005; Cairns, 2021a, 2021c).

AI is also increasingly used to support adaptation in Chinese higher education. Intelligent tutoring systems can personalise learning, address knowledge gaps, and improve comprehension in Mandarin-medium courses (D. Ma et al., 2024; Mao, 2024). AI-assisted language learning tools offer translation, pronunciation feedback, and conversational practice, helping students build linguistic competence while reducing anxiety (T. Wang et al., 2023). Generative AI (GenAI) also supports intercultural learning by creating authentic cultural scenarios and personalised dialogues that enhance intercultural communicative competence (Gao, 2023). Research in Chinese educational contexts indicates that GenAI can increase engagement, motivation, creativity, and learning effectiveness (Fan & Liu, 2026).

Beyond academic support, AI may assist emotional adaptation. Studies suggest that perceived AI empathy can reduce homesickness and provide emotional scaffolding through interactive support (H. Ma et al., 2025; Nazir, 2026). AI-powered tools also facilitate cultural learning by explaining social norms, generating diverse perspectives, and enabling role-playing activities that strengthen intercultural competence (Dai et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Practical applications, such as navigation and information services, further ease everyday adaptation (UNESCO, 2021).

However, the effectiveness of AI is shaped by contextual factors. Institutional support, equitable access, privacy considerations, and China's digital environment influence adoption and outcomes (X. Chen & Xu, 2025; Y. Wang et al., 2025). While AI can facilitate early-stage adaptation, excessive reliance may impede authentic social relationships, language development, and critical thinking (Chan & Hu, 2023; Panmei, 2025). Additional concerns include algorithmic bias, hallucinations, plagiarism, and data privacy, underscoring the importance of using AI as a complement rather than a substitute for human interaction and support (X. Chen & Xu, 2025; M. Li et al., 2025).

3. Theoretical Frameworks

This study integrates established theories of acculturation, cross-cultural adaptation, and intercultural competence with emerging AI-mediated learning frameworks. The integration provides a generative lens for examining how AI tools may support Asian international students' cultural adaptation in Chinese universities, as perceived by the students themselves. These frameworks are selected for their complementary strengths. Section 3.4 clarifies what each framework explains and how the frameworks inform the notion of adaptation scaffolding used in this study.

3.1. Acculturation Frameworks

Berry's (2005) bidimensional acculturation framework describes how students orient themselves toward heritage and host cultures and has been applied to China's collectivist, Confucian-influenced context (Y. Liu, 2025; Mao & Ji, 2026). The framework distinguishes integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalisation based on heritage-culture maintenance and host-culture contact. Integration has frequently been associated with more favourable psychological and sociocultural outcomes in Chinese contexts (Mao et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2025). For AI-enhanced adaptation, this framework suggests that tools should facilitate bidirectional integration—supporting heritage identity while promoting host engagement—rather than reinforcing separation or one-way assimilation. However, binary models are criticised for overlooking fluid hybrid "third-culture" identities shaped by power asymmetries and migratory contexts. In China, Sinocentric elements of higher education (e.g., BRI-driven inflows from Global South countries) may add further complexity (S. Liu, 2015; Y. Liu, 2025). Cultural fusion theory (Croucher & Kramer, 2017) and interculturality

(Dervin et al., 2020) better capture agentic negotiation, informing AI designs that avoid cultural essentialism and generate context-sensitive, hybrid-identity support.

Ward and Kennedy's (1999) dual-process model differentiates measurable psychological and sociocultural outcomes. It further refines analysis by separating psychological adaptation (emotional well-being, life satisfaction) from sociocultural adaptation (behavioural competence in daily host environments). In China, acculturative stress disproportionately affects psychological outcomes, while discrimination affects sociocultural skills (Yang et al., 2023). H. Ma et al. (2025), in a three-wave longitudinal study of 329 international students across Chinese universities, report that GenAI use is associated with stronger sociocultural adaptation via positive reappraisal (cognitive reframing of challenges) and perceived empathy (emotional support simulation). AI anthropomorphism moderates these pathways, with higher perceived humanness amplifying benefits. These findings highlight AI's differential operation across adaptation dimensions and underscore interaction design (warmth, responsiveness) as critical.

3.2. Deardorff's Intercultural Competence Model and AI Scaffolding

Deardorff's (2006) Pyramid and Process Models, derived from expert consensus, supply actionable competence dimensions that map directly to AI affordances and define intercultural competence (IC) as effective and appropriate communication across cultures through integrated knowledge, skills, and attitudes. "Understanding others' worldviews" achieved unanimous agreement. Crucially, no single component (e.g., language) suffices, challenging over-reliance on AI translation tools. Linguistic gains are necessary but insufficient; AI needs to scaffold attitudinal, knowledge, and behavioural dimensions holistically. Zhang et al. (2025) empirically validated IC hierarchies (knowledge > skills > attitudes > consciousness), revealing persistent cultural knowledge deficits even among proficient students. This supports embedding AI within broader IC frameworks to prevent linguistically fluent yet culturally shallow adaptation.

3.3. Byram's ICC Model and Human–AI Collaboration

Byram's (2021) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model specifies five *savoirs*: attitudes (openness, curiosity, respect), knowledge, interpreting/relating skills, discovery/interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness. Each maps to AI contributions—e.g., curated content for knowledge, scenario simulations for skills, and reflective prompts for critical awareness (Dervin, 2025)—while addressing China-specific elements like Mandarin pragmatics and relational hierarchies.

H. Wang and Gao (2025) provide empirical support, showing that AI-mediated interaction directly ($\beta = 0.292$) and indirectly (via enjoyment, $\beta = 0.051$) predicts ICC, moderated by instructor AI competence. Yet, the "authenticity paradox" persists: AI simulations lack real relational stakes and unpredictability (Saxena & Prahl, 2026). A human–AI collaborative framework positions AI as experience generator and educators as critical facilitators, mitigating risks of surface-level competence or algorithmic biases (Skubis et al., 2026).

3.4. Integrating the Frameworks: What Each Explains and How They Inform Adaptation Scaffolding

The six frameworks overlap in places. Table 1 therefore clarifies the distinct contribution each makes. Berry's framework and cultural fusion/interculturality address students' positioning toward heritage and host cultures. Ward and Kennedy distinguish psychological and sociocultural outcomes. Deardorff and Byram specify the components of intercultural competence. Human–AI collaboration frameworks address how responsibility is shared among AI, educators and learners.

Table 1. Theoretical frameworks and their contributions to adaptation scaffolding.

Framework	What It Primarily Explains	Use in This Study	Link to Adaptation Scaffolding
Berry (2005) acculturation	Orientations toward heritage and host cultures (integration, assimilation, separation, marginalisation)	Interpreting how AI use relates to host-culture engagement and heritage maintenance (e.g., dietary and religious practices)	Direction of support: scaffolding should serve bidirectional integration, not one-way assimilation
Cultural fusion (Croucher & Kramer, 2017); interculturality (Dervin et al., 2020)	Fluid, hybrid and power-sensitive identity negotiation beyond fixed categories	Sensitising lens for identity-related accounts; guards against essentialism	Support should be context-sensitive and avoid essentialising students' cultures
Ward and Kennedy (1999) dual-process model	Two adaptation outcomes: psychological (well-being) and sociocultural (behavioural competence)	Organising participants' accounts of reduced anxiety and everyday competence	Domains in which support is perceived as needed
Deardorff (2006) intercultural competence	Competence as integrated knowledge, skills and attitudes; no single component suffices	Interpreting whether AI use extends beyond language to knowledge and attitudes	What support should help develop; why linguistic support alone is insufficient
Byram (2021) ICC model	Five savoirs, including critical cultural awareness	Mapping AI uses to specific savoirs and noting where critical awareness is uneven	Competence targets for scaffold design and for gradual withdrawal
Human–AI collaboration (Skubis et al., 2026; H. Wang & Gao, 2025)	Division of work between AI, educators and learners; limits of simulated authenticity	Interpreting verification practices, personal boundaries and calls for institutional guidance	Who provides, monitors and withdraws support

We use "scaffolding" in its original educational sense: temporary, contingent support that enables a learner to accomplish what they could not yet do alone and that is withdrawn as competence grows (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976). In this study, the concept serves as an interpretive lens linking the frameworks. Berry's and cultural fusion perspectives indicate the orientation that support should serve; Ward and Kennedy indicate the domains in which support is needed; Deardorff and Byram indicate the competences that support should help develop; and human–AI collaboration indicates who should provide, monitor and withdraw that support. "Multidimensional adaptation scaffolding" then denotes AI support that spans these domains simultaneously (see Section 6.6).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study employed a qualitative, interpretivist design informed by social constructivist epistemology (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It assumes that meanings are co-constructed through social interaction and that AI-mediated adaptation is shaped by students' subjective experiences. Semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis were adopted to generate and interpret patterns of shared meaning while allowing flexibility for emerging insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The approach addressed the processes through which participants perceived AI as facilitating or constraining adaptation, together with barriers, ethical concerns, and institutional influences, while capturing participants' diverse experiences.

4.2. Research Context

Data were collected at five universities in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China (see Table 2). Kunming provides a distinctive setting for two reasons. First, it is a major Belt and Road hub that hosts many Asian international students. Second, it is in China's southwest, far from the eastern coastal cities, and its local dialects can add to the language demands of daily life. The study also reflects China's wider digital environment, in which participants described how limited access to some international tools shaped their use of AI.

Table 2. Participant characteristics.

ID	Country of Origin	Age	Sex	Univ.	Mandarin (CEFR)	AI Tools Used	Discipline	Time in China
P1	Sri Lanka	20	M	A	C1	DeepSeek, Doubao	Computer science	3 years
P2	Sri Lanka	20	M	A	A1	DeepSeek, Doubao	Business administration	6 months
P3	India	36	M	B	C1	DeepSeek, Doubao	Chinese language	1 year
P4	Thailand	21	M	A	C1	ChatGPT	Chinese language	1 year
P5	Sri Lanka	21	M	C	C1	DeepSeek	Computer science	1.5 years
P6	Nepal	19	M	A	A1	ChatGPT	Chinese language	6 months
P7	Indonesia	24	M	A	C1	ChatGPT, Kimi	International business and trade	2 years
P8	Indonesia	NR	M	A	A1	ChatGPT, Doubao	Internet and new media	6 months
P9	Tajikistan	NR	M	A	B1	ChatGPT, DeepSeek	Chinese language	1 year
P10	Myanmar	20	M	A	A1	ChatGPT, DeepSeek	Chinese language	1 year
P11	Myanmar	20	M	A	B1	Doubao, Wenxin Yiyan	International business and trade	1 year
P12	Myanmar	21	M	C	B1	Doubao, Wenxin Yiyan	NR	6 months
P13	India	22	M	A	A2	DeepSeek, Wenxin Yiyan, WeChat †, ChatGPT, Gemini	Language studies	1 year
P14	Vietnam	21	M	A	C1	DeepSeek, Doubao, ChatGPT	International economics and trade	2 years
P15	Pakistan	22	M	D	A1	DeepSeek, ChatGPT	Chinese language	6 months
P16	Thailand	23	F	A	C1	ChatGPT, Doubao	Chinese language	1 year
P17	Bangladesh	21	F	A	A2	ChatGPT, DeepSeek	Chinese language	1 year
P18	Bangladesh	21	M	A	A2	ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini	Chinese language	1 year
P19	Thailand	23	M	A	C1	ChatGPT, Doubao, Gemini	Chinese language	1 year
P20	Thailand	22	M	A	C2	ChatGPT	Chinese language	1 year
P21	Vietnam	24	M	A	C2	Doubao, Yuanbao, Douyin †	Chinese language	1 year
P22	Malaysia	NR	F	A	A1	Doubao	NR	1 year

Table 2. *Cont.*

ID	Country of Origin	Age	Sex	Univ.	Mandarin (CEFR)	AI Tools Used	Discipline	Time in China
P23	Thailand	23	M	B	A1	DeepSeek, HelloTalk †, Doubao	International relations	1 year
P24	Vietnam	NR	M	A	A1	DeepSeek, Kimi, Doubao	International relations	6 months
P25	Vietnam	24	M	A	C2	ChatGPT, Doubao	International Chinese language education	1 year
P26	Vietnam	23	M	A	C2	DeepSeek, Doubao	International economics and trade	2 years
P27	Myanmar	21	M	A	C1	ChatGPT, Doubao, Gemini	Chinese language	1 year
P28	Thailand	NR	F	B	C1	ChatGPT, Doubao, WeChat	Computer science	1 year
P29	Thailand	NR	F	A	C1	ChatGPT, Doubao	Chinese language	6 months
P30	Thailand	22	M	A	C1	Doubao, WeChat	Chinese language	6 months
P31	Thailand	21	M	B	C1	Doubao, WeChat	Computer science	1 year
P32	Thailand	20	M	B	C1	Doubao	Computer science	1 year
P33	Thailand	22	M	A	A1	DeepSeek, Kimi, Doubao	International economics and business	1.5 years
P34	Sri Lanka	19	M	A	C2	DeepSeek, Doubao	Engineering	1 year
P35	Thailand	20	M	A	A1	DeepSeek	Chinese language	3 months
P36	Sri Lanka	20	M	E	C1	DeepSeek, ChatGPT, Baidu †, Zotero †	Electrical engineering and automation	1.5 years
P37	Indonesia	NR	F	A	A2	DeepSeek, Doubao, ChatGPT	International economics and trade	1 year

Note. $N = 37$. M = male; F = female; NR = not reported. Mandarin proficiency levels follow the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): A1–A2 = basic user, B1–B2 = independent user, C1–C2 = proficient user. To protect confidentiality, the names of participating universities were replaced with pseudonyms (University A–E), and identifying information was removed from participant quotations. † = conventional digital platform or non-generative tool, not classified as generative AI (see Section 4.3).

4.3. Participant Recruitment and Sampling

Participants were recruited via purposive sampling with maximum variation (Patton, 2015). Variation was sought in country of origin, discipline, length of residence, AI use, and Mandarin proficiency. Eligibility required non-Chinese Asian students enrolled in Yunnan higher education, residing in China for at least three months, and actively using AI tools.

Sample size and information power. The sample size was guided by the concept of information power (Malterud et al., 2016) rather than by data saturation. We judged information power to be reasonably high for five reasons: (a) the study aim was relatively focused, namely perceived AI use in cultural adaptation; (b) the sample was specific, comprising Asian international students who were active AI users; (c) the interviews were in-depth (35–75 min) and used a piloted protocol; (d) maximum-variation sampling produced diverse accounts; and (e) the analysis was cross-case and theoretically informed.

Participant characteristics and heterogeneity. Table 2 summarises participant characteristics. The participants came from 11 Asian countries. Thailand was the largest group (12), followed by Sri Lanka and Vietnam (5 each), Myanmar (4), Indonesia (3), India and Bangladesh (2 each), and one each from Nepal, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Malaysia. Most were from Southeast Asia (25), then South Asia (11) and Central Asia (1). The sample was predominantly male (31 male, 6 female). Age was reported for 30 participants and ranged from 19 to 36, with a mean of about 22 (P3, aged 36, was the one clear outlier). "Asian international students" is used only as a descriptive label for the sample and does not imply homogeneity. Participants were analysed as a single dataset. No systematic comparison across the five universities or across national groups was undertaken, and differences are noted only where the data permit (Section 5.7). A substantial majority of participants (28 of 37, 76%) were enrolled at University A. This concentration reflects two practical factors: University A hosts a larger number of Asian international students than the other four universities in the sample, and two members of the research team are affiliated with this university, which facilitated access for recruitment and interviews. Findings concerning institutional support and policy environments (Sections 5.6 and 6.5) should therefore be interpreted with this sampling imbalance in mind, because they chiefly reflect conditions at University A and may not represent the other four universities.

Classification of AI tools. Table 2 lists the tools exactly as participants named them, and not all were generative AI. We therefore distinguish two groups. Generative AI (GenAI) applications are large language model-based tools that produce novel text, dialogue or explanations in response to user prompts (ChatGPT, Gemini, DeepSeek, Doubao, Kimi, Wenxin Yiyan and Yuanbao). Other AI-enabled or conventional digital platforms, marked † in Table 2, are tools whose defining function is not generation: search engines (Google, Baidu); social, messaging, language-exchange and video platforms (WeChat, HelloTalk, Douyin); dedicated translation software; and reference-management software (Zotero). References to "AI" in Section 5 denote GenAI applications unless a non-generative tool is named explicitly or contrasted with GenAI (e.g., Section 5.1.1).

4.4. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted from May to July 2026 by bilingual researchers in Mandarin and English. Participants chose their preferred language, and all sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated when necessary. Translations were cross-checked for accuracy by a second bilingual researcher. Quotations in the Findings section are presented as spoken (interviews in English) or as translated (interviews in Mandarin), without grammatical correction; ellipses indicate omitted text, and square brackets indicate clarifying insertions. The interview protocol was piloted and refined, covering four domains: AI familiarity, academic and social AI use, perceived affordances and ethical concerns, and institutional factors influencing AI effectiveness. Interviews lasted 35–75 min and were conducted privately on campus or online to ensure confidentiality and minimise disruption.

4.5. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021), in which themes are understood as patterns of shared meaning actively constructed by the researchers through engagement with the data, rather than as entities that "emerge" from it. Consistent with the interpretivist, social constructivist orientation described above, the analysis combined inductive coding with theoretically informed interpretation. Researchers first familiarised themselves with the transcripts through repeated reading and reflective note-taking. Two researchers then coded the transcripts independently. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, this double coding was not used to calculate inter-coder agreement or

to establish a single "accurate" coding. Rather, it brought two interpretive standpoints to the data, and differences in coding were discussed to deepen analytic insight rather than to reach consensus. The code labels and definitions produced through these discussions served as a shared, evolving record of analytic decisions, not as a fixed codebook applied to the data. Codes were then clustered into candidate themes through iterative comparison within and across transcripts. Themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the full dataset, refined, and named. Finally, analytic narratives were constructed by weaving together participant quotations, interpretive commentary, and theoretical perspectives. Throughout, the researchers kept reflexive notes on how their positions, assumptions and disciplinary backgrounds shaped coding and theme development.

Researcher positionality. The four-member research team included two researchers from a New Zealand university and two from a Yunnan university, with backgrounds in intercultural communication, education, communication, and information science, and prior research on international students' cultural adaptation. These backgrounds shaped the study in two ways. First, a sympathetic orientation toward international students' adaptation challenges and an interest in AI as a potentially facilitative resource may have sensitised the analysis to perceived benefits. Second, familiarity with Chinese higher education supported rapport but may have normalised some institutional practices. Reflexive discussion aimed to make these influences visible and to attend to accounts that complicated them (e.g., narrow, language-focused use patterns and reports of limited social integration).

Frequency terms. To make the evidential basis transparent, indicative terms are used in the Findings section: "most" (more than half of participants), "many" (roughly a quarter to a half), "several" (a smaller number), and "a few" or "a subset" (very few).

4.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the researchers' institutional Human Research Ethics Committee. All participants gave written informed consent. To protect confidentiality, data were stored securely, participants' names were replaced with codes (P1, P2, P3 …) indicating the order of the interviews, and no personally identifiable information is reported.

5. Findings

This section presents findings on how Asian international students in China described using AI, which we interpret as a multidimensional scaffold for linguistic, academic, and everyday adaptation. Drawing on participant narratives, it examines AI's role in communicative confidence, academic task facilitation, and sociocultural navigation, alongside perceived affective support through face-saving and anxiety reduction. The findings further explore strategic localisation of AI tools, critical engagement with accuracy and bias, the dependency paradox, and institutional voids shaping students' AI practices. Participants' accounts are reported as perceptions and self-reports. Table 3 summarises the AI tools and uses participants reported, and frequency terms follow the conventions in Section 4.5.

Table 3. Summary of AI use and tools reported by participants.

Use Category	Tools Mentioned	Examples from the Data	Illustrative Participants
Translation and comprehension in Mandarin-medium settings	AI chatbots; dedicated translation software for literal needs	Translating teachers' speech and chatting with classmates; support with Chinese writing	P4, P6, P8, P14, P16, P30, P37

Table 3. *Cont.*

Use Category	Tools Mentioned	Examples from the Data	Illustrative Participants
Academic work	AI chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Kimi)	Summarising long literature; drafting texts and speech scripts; organising classmates' viewpoints in group work	P24, P27, P31, P34, P36
Sociocultural and everyday navigation	AI chatbots, including photo/video functions	Checking ingredients and halal/vegetarian status; interpreting menus; checking traffic rules; translating local dialect; seeking pre-arrival information	P3, P9, P11, P20, P21, P22, P24, P26, P29, P32, P33
Rehearsing communication and reducing face threat	AI chatbots	Pre-scripting classroom contributions; adjusting tone before talking to teachers; asking AI instead of teachers when embarrassed	P17, P19, P22, P25, P27, P35
Verification, prompting and integrity practices	Various	Double-checking facts; refining prompts; consulting instructors on legitimate use	P7, P22, P23, P32, P34

Note. In this study, "generative AI" (GenAI) refers to large language model applications capable of producing novel text, dialogue and explanations (e.g., ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Doubao, Kimi, Wenxin Yiyan, Gemini, Yuanbao; see Section 4.3). These are distinguished from conventional digital platforms and non-generative tools such as general search engines (Google, Baidu); dedicated translation software; reference-management software (Zotero); and social, messaging or video applications (WeChat, HelloTalk, Douyin) that participants also mentioned (see Table 2). Participants named ChatGPT, Google and Gemini as tools used before arrival and DeepSeek, Doubao, Kimi and Wenxin Yiyan as the primary generative tools used after arrival in China (Section 5.3).

5.1. AI as a Multidimensional Scaffold for Linguistic, Academic, and Everyday Adaptation

5.1.1. Linguistic Mediation and Communicative Confidence

The most immediate affordance reported across the dataset was participants' perception that AI bridged real-time language barriers in Mandarin-medium classrooms and daily interactions (P4, P6, P8, P16, P37). Participants in the early stages of Chinese-language acquisition described AI not merely as a convenience but as a precondition for basic academic functioning. P8, a new media student, explained: "I usually use it because I, uh, I can't speaking Chinese very well. So, when I go to classes... when I must to speak Chinese, I usually use AI for the translation." Similarly, P4, a Thai student of Chinese, noted: "Because the teacher he speak Chinese, I don't really understand, so, um, I use it for translate what the teacher say." This pattern extended beyond classroom comprehension to social encounters. P16, a Thai student, reported that "AI can translate Chinese very quick, so I have more confidence in the class, and, uh, I feel more confident to use AI for translate when I chatting with Chinese classmates." P37, an Indonesian scholarship student enrolled in Mandarin-taught courses, relied on AI as essential scaffolding for both written and spoken language: "I am, um, scholarship student and all my courses is taught in Chinese, so AI help me a lot with the Chinese writing."

As defined in Section 4.3, generative and non-generative tools are treated separately. Participants distinguished between AI-based translation and dedicated translation software, using the former for flexible, explanatory tasks and the latter for literal, transactional needs (P12, Myanmar; P14, Vietnam). This suggests that participants valued AI less for lexical accuracy per se than for its perceived capacity to contextualise meaning—a function aligned with Byram's (2021) *savoir comprendre*, which demands interpretation and relational processing beyond decoding.

5.1.2. Academic Task Facilitation

Participants reported using AI across a wide range of academic work, including lecture comprehension, literature management, essay drafting, and presentation design. Graduate students managing dense disciplinary texts in a second or third language described uploading lengthy articles to AI for summarisation. P24, a Vietnamese graduate student in International Relations, explained: "I upload long literature to AI and let it, uh, summarize the main content and the research topic for me... it also help a lot for writing drafts and, um, speech scripts." P31, a Thai computer science major, found AI particularly valuable for "Chinese writing, um, course understanding, and group collaboration," elaborating that during group assignments AI "can help us to translate, to communicate, and, uh, organize the viewpoints from different culture," a role that supported collaboration across language and cultural differences. This cross-cultural academic mediation was illustrated by P35, a Thai student, who used AI in a group project on Yunnan ethnic minority cultures to "organize the viewpoint of classmates from different countries and, um, translate Chinese materials to the languages everyone can understand."

5.1.3. Sociocultural Navigation and Everyday Adaptation

Beyond formal academics, participants mobilised AI to interpret unfamiliar cultural practices, institutional rules, and social norms. P3, a vegetarian student from India, used AI to identify ingredients and convey his dietary restrictions to restaurant staff: "I am vegetarian—uh, I don't eat meat or egg. When I go to eat, I don't know this dish contain meat or egg or not, so I use AI for quickly find out, and it can also, um, tell the restaurant owner about my dietary requirement." P9, a Muslim student from Tajikistan, used AI to assess the halal status of unfamiliar canteen dishes: "If I eating and I see the dish I don't know in the canteen, I ask GPT, um, tell me what is inside—because I'm Muslim, if it say I can't eat, I don't eat; if it's fine, then I eat." AI also served as an on-demand source of information about rules and regulations. P3 recounted a roadside encounter with traffic police: "I ride shared bike with my friend and the police, uh, they stop us. I can't remember the traffic rules in Chinese, so I use AI for check, and I understand the, um, one-person-one-bike rule... it help me follow the China rules."

Several participants used AI proactively to prepare for unfamiliar situations. P24 looked up Yunnan's climate and living habits before arrival, while P21, a Vietnamese student, used visual AI functions to interpret restaurant menus: "If I go to restaurant and I don't understand [the menu], I can use AI, uh, take a photo or short video to get the answer." P26, from Vietnam, addressed the added complexity of regional dialect by using AI to "translate the local dialect to standard Mandarin, so, um, communicating with local people is much more smooth." These patterns illustrate participants' use of AI as a sociocultural practice, a tool for what Ward and Kennedy's (1999) framework describes as behavioural competence in daily host environments.

5.2. Perceived Affective Support—Face-Saving, Anxiety Reduction, and Social Risk-Taking

A distinctive pattern across the dataset was participants' description of AI as a lower-stakes alternative to approaching teachers or classmates directly, particularly when a question felt embarrassing, face-threatening, or likely to expose a knowledge gap (P19, P22, P25, P35). P19, a Thai student, explained: "If there is something I don't understand in class, I ask AI for teach me. If I don't dare to ask the teacher, uh, I ask AI instead." P22, from Malaysia, linked this to a broader shift in classroom participation: "Before I use AI, I was really shy for talking in class with local students. Now I can, um, check my words first, so I feel more confident when I talk and do schoolwork."

This face-saving function was connected explicitly to the emotional toll of early adaptation. P25 reported:

> AI is like a bridge, um, it help me cross the language barrier and understand the classroom rules. Many questions I'm too shy, too embarrassed to ask classmates or teachers, I can ask AI first. What surprise me the most is, uh, it greatly reduce the anxiety I feel when I first arrive—I was worry about not keeping up or fitting in, but with AI explain things, the transition is much more easy.

This account resonates with H. Ma et al.'s (2025) cognitive-affective model, in which perceived AI empathy and positive reappraisal mediate sociocultural adaptation. For P25, AI was described not merely as transmitting information but as absorbing the emotional burden of novice status.

Participants also used AI to rehearse socially risky communication. P35, a Thai student who had arrived only three months prior, described pre-scripting classroom contributions: "When I first arrive, I was afraid to speak in class because my Chinese was not good… using AI for prepare the speech content in advance and, uh, correct the expression error, I gradually dare to speak more active." This rehearsal function extended to authority figures. He reported that "before every conversation with teacher, I use AI to help me write out what I want to say and, um, adjust it to suitable tone… I become more brave to talk with teachers by my own initiative."

However, the perceived social-enablement effect was not uniform. P13, an Indian student in language studies, reported minimal success in informal settings such as the university gym despite using AI for language practice: "We just look at each other. They think I'm foreigner, not Chinese, so, uh, they feel it's not safe [to approach me]." This suggests that AI's contribution to social integration may operate primarily by lowering the linguistic threshold for interaction but cannot by itself resolve barriers rooted in perceived outsider status. This boundary condition is consistent with Berry's (2005) emphasis on host-culture receptivity as a co-determinant of integration outcomes.

5.3. Strategic Localisation and the Domestication of AI Practice

Many participants reported a post-arrival migration (e.g., P3, P7, P23, P24, P26) from internationally familiar tools (ChatGPT, Google, Gemini) to Chinese-specific platforms (DeepSeek, Doubao, Kimi, Wenxin Yiyan). Participants attributed this shift less to considered preference than to infrastructural necessity and local relevance. P26 explained the practical calculus plainly: "Use other AI tools need VPN, which is, uh, troublesome, so Doubao is the best choice [in China]." P23, an international relations student, added that Chinese tools were "much more better for handle the Chinese language and, um, understand the local context and academic system [than the tools I used at home]."

For some, tool choice was anchored in trust and family habit rather than systematic comparison. P3 reported: "Before coming to China I use Google, but now my whole family use DeepSeek instead—it's convenient, and, um, I trust the app." Peer networks served as a powerful diffusion mechanism. P24 acknowledged that, while DeepSeek offered strong analysis, "the main reason I use [Doubao] is, uh, because everyone around me are using it." P7, from Indonesia, retained some use of international tools but noted that Kimi "sometimes give more innovative answers—um, things we maybe not think of ourselves," while P11 observed that "foreign AI know little about Chinese culture, while, uh, Chinese AI fit my life here more better."

This ecosystem migration was not absolute. A subset of participants continued to rely on international tools (ChatGPT, Gemini) alongside DeepSeek and Wenxin Yiyan (P13, India). P37 explicitly rejected ChatGPT for academic Chinese work because "its sentence

structure and grammar is sometimes, um, not actually right, so I prefer AI tools originally from China." The Sri Lankan engineering student (P34) captured the pragmatic logic of localisation: Chinese tools "work well without VPN, understand local search result, and, uh, often is free or very cheap."

These accounts suggest that, from participants' perspectives, AI adoption in this context was shaped by infrastructure and access. Participants described restricted access to some international tools (often mentioned in connection with needing a VPN) as pushing them toward domestic platforms, which they perceived as stronger in Mandarin-language processing and locally relevant knowledge. These are participants' perceptions. The study did not independently assess the technical performance, access conditions or possible cultural biases of these platforms. Whether domestic tools offer less support for languages other than Mandarin or reflect particular cultural perspectives was not examined here and warrants future research.

5.4. Critical Engagement—Reliability Gaps, Algorithmic Bias, and Self-Regulated Ethics

5.4.1. Accuracy Limitations and Compensatory Verification

Despite generally positive appraisals, participants frequently identified accuracy problems, particularly in translation and cross-cultural explanation, and described compensatory strategies rather than uncritical acceptance. P1, from Sri Lanka, noted: "Using AI, Chinese is usually quite accurate, but, um, English translation is sometimes not quite right, not very accurate." P7 was more emphatic: "Inaccuracy will definitely happen, so as I said, we can't rely on AI completely—uh, we still need to double check the content by ourselves… I found so many times they also make mistake, so we need to check again." This awareness translated into deliberate, bounded patterns of use. P3 described consulting AI only after first attempting a task independently: "I only use AI when I don't understand something—I don't rely on it all the time, otherwise, um, you become lazy. I try by myself first, and only use AI if I really can't manage, so it don't affect my own learning progress."

5.4.2. Concrete Encounters with Cultural Bias

P34 reported that when querying "typical Asian food," AI produced only Chinese and Japanese examples and that it would "ignore the Southeast Asia food, completely." We interpret this incident as a possible illustration of how training-data composition may reproduce epistemic marginalisation, rendering invisible cultural backgrounds that constitute much of the sample. P14, from Vietnam, offered a more consequential example of uncritical acceptance: when shown stereotyped AI imagery depicting Yunnan as impoverished and Beijing as wealthy, he nonetheless treated the output as authoritative: "Because I am foreigner, I just, uh, think it is correct. It is correct." This contrast—between participants who recognised bias and those who granted AI unwarranted objectivity—suggests that critical AI literacy may be unevenly distributed and may not develop automatically through frequent use.

5.4.3. Self-Regulated Academic Integrity

Participants articulated explicit boundaries between legitimate assistance and academic dishonesty. P22 stated: "I only use AI for ideas and editing. All my thoughts is my own. I always tell my teacher I use AI just like a helper, um, not for do all the work for me." P23 similarly insisted: "I never use AI for write my essays or do the actual thinking. I only use it as tool for help me brainstorm or, uh, edit. Because I know AI sometimes can make up fake information, I always double-check the facts and the sources by myself."

Several participants described moving beyond general awareness to active remediation involving instructor consultation. P34 recounted an incident in which AI suggested content

that "didn't meet Chinese academic norms—like, um, directly copying someone else's viewpoint. I didn't accept it. Instead, I ask my teacher and adjust the content follow their guidance." P32 described paraphrasing a Chinese source via AI, recognising that the output was "too close to the original—I feel it can be consider plagiarism. I rewrite it with my own words, uh, and I cite both the original and the AI's assistance in my notes, and talk to my professor, who say using AI for translation is fine but not for rewriting other people's ideas." These accounts suggest a developing tier of ethical literacy in which some students not only self-regulate but also seek institutional validation—a pattern that may indicate readiness for more explicit pedagogical partnership.

5.4.4. Emerging Prompt Sophistication

A subset of more experienced users described deliberate, iterative strategies for improving AI output quality. P23 reported developing "a habit of 'prompt refining'—if the AI give me bad answer, I learn how to change my question and, um, ask it in better way until I get exactly what I need." P24 described a form of longitudinal tool training: "You can train it. If you use Chinese consistently, not switching between Vietnamese and Chinese, you will find, uh, its Chinese expression improve over time and the awkward phrasing gradually become less—because you are slowly training it." We interpret these practices as an advanced tier of AI literacy that moves beyond reactive querying toward agentic co-construction of tool performance. They were reported by a subset of participants and should not be read as typical.

5.5. The Dependency Paradox and Retrospective Accounts of Changing AI Use

For many participants, the scope of AI use was described as expanding over time from narrow, transactional translation toward broader academic, social, and cultural functions. P2, a recently arrived Sri Lankan student, observed: "Since I arrive in China, I become more dependent on AI, and now, um, I see it as important tool for education." P11, from Myanmar, traced a similar trajectory: "Before, I only use it for translation; now I use it to, uh, learn about culture and for the social life."

Yet participants' accounts of this expanding use also carried a paradox. Several participants described, in retrospect, a trajectory from initial efficiency gains to concerning over-reliance, followed by deliberate self-correction. Because participants were interviewed only once, these are remembered and perceived changes rather than longitudinally demonstrated trajectories. P5 offered the most detailed first-person narrative:

> At first, I think AI will just make my work more fast. But later I, um, realised I was let AI do all my work—I wasn't doing anything by myself anymore. My advice now is, uh, the best way to use AI is treat it like a teacher: let it teach you things, but you have to do the work by yourself, not give it to AI.

P34 employed a scaffolding metaphor: "AI is like a 'cultural training wheel'—it help me balance while I learn to ride on my own. It reduce the initial shock and, um, boost confidence, but it cannot replace real human connection."

Others reported what they themselves perceived as skill decline. P35 warned that "relying entirely on AI to write things, my own language ability is instead declined," while P34 admitted, "I notice I try to solve problem by myself less often now… um, my memory for Chinese characters become more bad."

In our interpretation, this tension suggests that participants viewed AI as a critical adaptive resource during early acculturation, but that unsupervised use risked undermining the longer-term linguistic and cultural competencies needed for deep integration. This

resonates with concerns in mobility capital literature (Cairns, 2021a) about episodic versus sustained skill development.

Individual variation was pronounced. P13 reported a deliberately narrow, language-focused pattern of use throughout his time in China. Although Table 2 lists five tools for him, he described restricting AI almost entirely to language practice and using it sparingly: "It's only useful for my language, pretty sure. That's all... I never feel any challenge, because, uh, I use it very little." This variation underscores that AI's role in cross-cultural adaptation is not a fixed or automatic outcome of exposure, but is actively shaped by individual disposition, specific need (e.g., religious or dietary requirements), and prior digital habits.

5.6. Structural-Institutional Voids and the Stigma of AI Use

Several participants located the principal barriers to effective, safe AI use not in the technology itself but in what they perceived as an absence of institutional guidance (P10, P11, P15, P23, P26, P37). These accounts come mainly from University A (four of the six participants cited; the others were at Universities B and D) and describe participants' own institutions. They are not claims about Chinese higher education in general. P10, from Myanmar, identified "limited AI knowledge among teachers and students, unclear school policies, and, um, over-dependence on AI tools... not all students have equal access to technology or stable internet connection." P11 requested that universities "offer more guidance courses about AI use for the international students," while P28, a Thai student, observed that "the school rarely teach international students how to use AI for cross-cultural learning, and, uh, the teachers also not very familiar with it."

The problem was not merely the absence of guidance but inconsistency and contradiction. P34 reported that his university did "not teach AI literacy at all," and that teachers held "varying knowledge—some teachers encourage AI, others ban it, um, without clear reason. The lack of policy make confusion." P37 confirmed that "many teachers is not familiar with AI application... most of teachers, uh, lack relevant knowledge." This inconsistency contributed to a perceived stigma. P26 explained:

> Many international students, when they first arrive, they think using AI is cheating—no one tell us how to use it properly. For us, um, AI is mostly a tool for keep up with our studies and understand our new environment, not a way for be lazy. If schools and teachers can talk about this more open and give clear guidance, we will feel more at ease and, uh, use AI in more healthy way.

P23 echoed this: "The main problem is that universities they do not really teach students how to use AI in the right way. Many students is afraid to use it because they worry about cheating, or, um, they use it too much and stop thinking for themselves."

Participants described the institutional void as particularly acute for international students, who faced the dual burden of navigating an unfamiliar academic culture while lacking clarity on whether AI-assisted translation, drafting, or cultural inquiry constituted legitimate support or academic misconduct. Participants' recommendations converged on three recommendations: (1) dedicated AI literacy workshops tailored to international students' cross-cultural needs; (2) clear, consistent institutional policies distinguishing legitimate AI assistance from dishonesty; and (3) instructor modelling of appropriate AI integration in coursework. P28 suggested the establishment of "AI elective courses" specifically oriented toward cross-cultural learning, while P31 recommended "AI workshops and, uh, clear guideline for international students."

5.7. Divergent Cases, Boundary Conditions and Evidence on Identity

Accounts were not uniform, and several diverged from the dominant patterns reported above. P13 named several tools but described narrow, language-focused AI use, reported few challenges, but also described limited social integration. P14 treated stereotyped AI-generated imagery as authoritative, whereas P34 identified cultural omissions in AI output. P3 described using AI only after attempting tasks independently, whereas P5 described a period in which AI did all the work. P1 found English translations less reliable than Chinese ones, and P37 rejected ChatGPT for academic Chinese writing, whereas other participants continued to use international tools alongside domestic ones (P7, P13). P24 appraised DeepSeek as strong for analysis yet chose another tool because peers used it. P26 noted that students initially regard AI use as cheating, whereas P22 and P23 described setting strict personal boundaries. These divergences suggest that perceived benefits and risks depended on students' language needs, prior digital habits, field of study and institutional context.

Evidence on identity was thinner than for the linguistic, academic, emotional and sociocultural dimensions. Identity-related material appeared mainly in participants' use of AI to maintain heritage-related religious and dietary practices (P3, P9), in P22's account of moving from shyness to greater confidence in class, and in P13's account of being treated as a "foreigner" by local peers. We therefore treat identity negotiation as an exploratory strand and do not claim that AI use led to identity reconstruction.

Participants also differed in background. Dietary and religious requirements (P3, P9), scholarship status and Chinese-medium study (P37), and unequal access to technology (P10) shaped how participants used AI. The sample was not designed for systematic comparison across national groups, so such differences are noted descriptively.

6. Discussion

This study examined how Asian international students in Chinese universities use AI tools to support cultural adaptation, the barriers and ethical concerns that accompany such use, and the institutional conditions that shape AI's effectiveness. The findings suggest that participants experienced AI as a multidimensional adaptive resource that extended beyond academic assistance to linguistic mediation, sociocultural navigation, emotional support, and intercultural learning, alongside important limitations. Throughout this section, participants' accounts are summarised briefly, and our interpretations are signposted (e.g., "we interpret", "we suggest") so that what participants said remains distinct from what we make of it.

Collectively, these findings suggest that AI is best understood, in participants' accounts, not as a substitute for intercultural adaptation but as a mediating technology that shapes how adaptation is experienced and enacted. The study therefore contributes to emerging scholarship on AI-mediated mobility by illustrating how digital tools became embedded, as participants described it, within the everyday acculturative processes of international students in a non-Western host context.

6.1. AI as a Multidimensional Resource for Adaptation

Addressing RQ1, participants perceived AI as supporting adaptation across academic, sociocultural, and psychological domains simultaneously. Consistent with recent studies highlighting AI's role in language learning and academic adjustment (D. Ma et al., 2024; Mao, 2024), participants described AI as an indispensable linguistic and comprehension scaffold. However, the present study adds to prior research by suggesting that, in participants' accounts, AI's contribution went beyond translation and information retrieval. Students used AI to interpret cultural norms, navigate bureaucratic procedures, understand dietary and religious requirements, and prepare for social interactions. In our interpretation, AI

therefore appeared to function as what might be termed multidimensional adaptation scaffolding. Participants felt it enabled them to participate more confidently in host-society practices and reduced the practical burdens of cultural transition. These findings support arguments that adaptation should be viewed holistically rather than solely through academic or linguistic outcomes.

The findings are also consistent with Ward and Kennedy's (1999) dual-process model, in that participants perceived AI as contributing to both sociocultural competence and psychological well-being. Participants frequently described AI as reducing anxiety, embarrassment, and uncertainty, particularly when interacting with teachers or local students. Rather than simply providing information, AI was described as enabling positive cognitive reframing of challenging situations and lowering the perceived risks of communication. This finding closely aligns with H. Ma et al.'s (2025) cognitive-affective model, which identified positive reappraisal and perceived AI empathy as mechanisms linking AI use to sociocultural adaptation. The present study offers qualitative illustrations of how these processes may operate in everyday interactions, particularly within the face-sensitive communicative norms characteristic of some Asian educational contexts. AI thus appears, in participants' accounts, to serve as an intermediary space where students can rehearse interactions, test linguistic formulations, and build confidence before engaging with real social actors.

6.2. AI and the Development of Intercultural Competence

A second major finding concerns participants' perceptions of AI's contribution to intercultural competence. Participants used AI to interpret unfamiliar customs, explain local practices, compare cultural perspectives, and facilitate communication across multilingual groups. These experiences are consistent with Deardorff's (2006) proposition that intercultural competence involves the integration of knowledge, attitudes, and skills rather than language proficiency alone. Participants described AI as helping them acquire cultural knowledge and develop interactional strategies, which we interpret as movement beyond basic linguistic adaptation. At the same time, participants' experiences suggest that intercultural competence remains fundamentally relational. While participants reported that AI enhanced preparedness and confidence, it did not eliminate social distance or guarantee acceptance by host-community members. The accounts of students who experienced exclusion or limited interaction with local peers suggest that intercultural learning may ultimately depend on reciprocal social engagement rather than technological assistance alone.

The findings similarly resonate with Byram's (2021) intercultural communicative competence framework and may tentatively extend it. Participants' accounts suggest that AI was perceived to support several of Byram's *savoirs*, particularly knowledge acquisition, interpretation, and preparation for interaction. However, the study also suggests the limits of AI-mediated interculturality. Although students could use AI to simulate conversations and receive culturally informed explanations, authentic intercultural competence requires engagement with ambiguity, emotional complexity, and genuine human relationships. This finding resonates with the emerging literature on the "authenticity paradox" of AI-mediated interaction (Saxena & Prahl, 2026), which argues that synthetic simulations can facilitate preparation but cannot fully reproduce the unpredictability of real intercultural encounters. The present study therefore lends tentative support to a human–AI collaborative model in which AI serves as a preparatory and reflective tool rather than a replacement for intercultural engagement.

6.3. Localisation, Context, and the Chinese Digital Ecosystem

An important contribution of this study lies in its focus on China as a host context. Participants' migration from global platforms such as ChatGPT and Gemini to domestic

tools including DeepSeek, Doubao, and Kimi suggests that, in participants' experience, adaptation was shaped by technological ecosystems as well as cultural environments. AI adoption was not simply an individual choice but a response to infrastructural conditions, language affordances, peer influence, and platform accessibility. These findings add to existing adaptation research by suggesting that digital adaptation and cultural adaptation are intertwined processes. International students were required not only to learn Chinese social and academic norms but also to navigate China's distinctive digital environment. As a result, AI-mediated adaptation appeared, in participants' accounts, to be a localised rather than universal phenomenon, which participants linked to platform access, language resources, and national technological infrastructures. These links reflect participants' perceptions and were not independently verified.

This finding is particularly significant because international students are rarely the explicit focus of research on AI in higher education (Bannister et al., 2024). By examining intra-Asian mobility in China, the study responds to calls for greater attention to non-Western educational contexts and South–South mobility flows. The results suggest that theories of cultural adaptation developed in Western settings may not fully capture the contextual realities of students navigating Chinese linguistic, institutional, and technological environments.

6.4. Ethical Literacy, Critical Awareness, and the Dependency Paradox

Addressing RQ2, the findings reveal that students generally approached AI with a degree of critical awareness rather than unquestioning trust. Participants frequently reported verifying outputs, cross-checking information, and maintaining explicit boundaries between acceptable assistance and academic misconduct. This finding challenges, at least among this sample of AI-using students, media portrayals that cast students mainly as plagiarists or as passive recipients of AI output (Sharma & Bearman, 2025). Instead, many participants described emerging forms of AI literacy characterised by verification, prompt refinement, source evaluation, and ethical self-regulation. These practices align with UNESCO's (2024) emphasis on critical AI competencies and suggest that international students are capable of developing sophisticated forms of human–AI collaboration when appropriate support structures exist.

Nevertheless, ethical and epistemic risks remained evident. Participants reported encountering inaccurate information, cultural omissions, and stereotypical representations. Particularly concerning was the uneven distribution of critical AI literacy; while some students questioned AI outputs, at least one participant (P14) accepted them as authoritative. These findings reinforce concerns regarding algorithmic bias and the reproduction of dominant cultural narratives within generative AI systems. They also highlight a new dimension of intercultural adaptation: the need to critically evaluate digital representations of culture. We therefore suggest that AI literacy could be conceptualised not merely as a technical competency but as a component of intercultural competence itself.

A further contribution of the study is the identification of what may be termed the dependency paradox. Several participants acknowledged the benefits of AI during the initial stages of adaptation while also expressing concerns about declining language proficiency, reduced memory, and diminished independent problem-solving. This finding echoes concerns raised by Chan and Hu (2023) regarding superficial learning and over-reliance on generative AI. However, participants' retrospective accounts add a temporal dimension, suggesting that dependency may not be a fixed state but part of a perceived developmental trajectory. Several participants described moving from enthusiastic adoption to reflective self-regulation, suggesting that sustainable AI use may require ongoing negotiation between

technological assistance and personal agency. Because the study is cross-sectional, this trajectory reflects retrospective perceptions of change and not longitudinal evidence.

Conceptual positioning of the dependency paradox. The dependency paradox is related to, but distinct from, established ideas. Automation bias involves uncritical acceptance of automated output (Parasuraman & Manzey, 2010), yet most participants verified AI outputs. Cognitive offloading (Risko & Gilbert, 2016) can be adaptive. The "ironies of automation" (Bainbridge, 1983) typically concern deskilling where the skill at risk is separate from the task goal. In adaptation, however, the competence being scaffolded (e.g., Mandarin or local social know-how) is also the developmental aim, creating tension. We therefore use "dependency paradox" to denote participants' perceived tension whereby AI support that eases short-term adaptation may erode longer-term competences. Participants managed this tension through self-regulation, instructor consultation and personal boundaries. We offer the concept as a sensitising lens grounded in retrospective accounts, not as a tested causal mechanism.

6.5. Institutional Conditions and Structural Gaps

Addressing RQ3, participants regarded institutional and environmental factors as important in shaping how useful and safe their AI use was. Evidence on the identity component of RQ3 was thin (Section 5.7), so identity negotiation is not treated as a finding here. Several participants identified the absence of clear policies, formal training, and instructor guidance as the principal barriers to responsible AI use. Rather than lacking motivation, participants described lacking institutional clarity about what constituted appropriate use. This uncertainty was particularly acute for international students simultaneously adapting to unfamiliar academic norms and technological expectations. The findings are therefore consistent with research suggesting that technological innovations are more likely to generate positive outcomes when embedded within supportive institutional structures (Chan, 2023). These observations concern the participants' own universities, chiefly University A (Section 4.3), not Chinese higher education generally.

Universities may therefore play a critical mediating role between AI technologies and intercultural outcomes. Participants called for AI literacy workshops, clearer policies, and explicit modelling of responsible AI use by instructors. Such requests suggest that adaptation is not solely an individual responsibility. Participants' accounts suggest that successful AI-mediated adaptation depends on institutional ecosystems combining technological access, ethical guidance, intercultural learning opportunities, and pedagogical support. This aligns with ecological perspectives on international student adaptation (Kudo, 2023), which emphasise the interaction between individual agency and environmental affordances.

6.6. Theoretical Contributions

This study offers four tentative, interpretive contributions. First, it suggests that acculturation theory could be extended by understanding AI as a mediating resource in participants' reported adaptation experiences rather than as a peripheral educational tool. Berry's framework traditionally focuses on interactions between individuals and host cultures; the present findings suggest that these interactions are technologically mediated.

Second, the study offers qualitative support for the relevance of Ward and Kennedy's dual-process model, suggesting that participants perceived AI as simultaneously influencing psychological and sociocultural adaptation through intertwined cognitive-affective processes. Rather than affecting only one dimension of adjustment, AI was perceived as operating across both domains.

Third, the findings contribute to intercultural competence theory by suggesting that participants perceived AI as able to scaffold several dimensions of intercultural learning

while remaining insufficient for achieving deep interculturality independently. This is consistent with a hybrid model of human–AI intercultural development in which technological and human resources operate complementarily.

Fourth, the study proposes multidimensional adaptation scaffolding and the dependency paradox as sensitising concepts for understanding AI-mediated adaptation among mobile students (see below and Section 6.4 for how they differ from existing ideas). Together, these concepts capture both the enabling and constraining dimensions of AI use within international education.

Multidimensional adaptation scaffolding extends the classic educational notion of scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976) in three ways. First, classic scaffolding targets a specific task; here, participants described support spanning linguistic, academic, sociocultural, emotional and intercultural domains within the broader transition of relocation. Second, classic scaffolding is calibrated and faded by a more knowledgeable other; AI support was learner-initiated, on-demand, and not designed to fade, so withdrawal depended on students' self-regulation and, where available, instructor guidance. Third, the scaffold was shaped by the host country's digital ecosystem and institutional conditions. We therefore present the concept as an integrative lens that links the frameworks in Table 1, rather than as a new theory that merely renames existing ideas.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model that links the empirical themes to the theoretical frameworks, the conditions of use, and the dependency paradox. The model is the authors' interpretation of participants' accounts; the relationships shown are perceived and have not been tested.

6.7. Practical Implications

Several practical implications emerge from the findings. Universities hosting international students should provide structured AI literacy programmes that address not only technical skills but also ethical use, source verification, intercultural awareness, and academic integrity. Orientation programmes should include training on AI-supported cultural adaptation, particularly for students unfamiliar with China's digital ecosystem. Institutions should also develop transparent policies distinguishing acceptable AI assistance from academic misconduct, thereby reducing confusion and stigma.

Faculty development is equally important. Instructors require training to model responsible AI use, integrate AI into intercultural learning activities, and support students in balancing technological assistance with independent learning. Finally, AI developers should consider the cultural diversity of international student populations by improving multilingual capabilities, reducing cultural biases, and designing tools that promote critical reflection rather than passive dependence.

6.8. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in universities located in Yunnan Province, and findings may not be fully transferable to other Chinese regions or international contexts. Second, a substantial majority of participants (28 of 37) were enrolled at University A, for the reasons given in Section 4.3. Interpretations of institutional support and policy environments (Sections 5.6 and 6.5) are therefore weighted toward conditions at University A and should be read with appropriate caution. Third, participants were already AI users by design and were recruited from five Yunnan universities through international student offices, snowball sampling, and WeChat groups. These routes may over-represent students who are digitally connected, socially networked and comfortable with AI, and under-represent students who avoid AI, have limited access to technology, or are less connected to these channels. Their experiences may

differ substantially, and the benefits reported here may be overstated relative to the wider international student population. Fourth, the study relied on self-reported experiences and therefore cannot determine the actual effectiveness of AI use in improving adaptation outcomes. All claims about benefits are accordingly claims about participants' perceptions. Fifth, the cross-sectional design captures adaptation at a particular point in time and cannot fully examine how AI use evolves throughout students' mobility trajectories. Accounts of change over time are retrospective and may be affected by recall and reconstruction. Sixth, the sample was uneven. Participants came from 11 countries, with Thai students accounting for 12 of the 37 participants. Of the 37 participants, 31 were male and 6 female. Subgroup sizes were too small for systematic comparison, so the findings should not be read as describing "Asian international students" as a homogeneous group. In addition, interviews were conducted in English or Mandarin and translated where necessary, so some nuance may have been lost despite cross-checking by a second bilingual researcher (Section 4.4). Seventh, privacy and data-security concerns, which are prominent in the literature, were not developed as a theme in the interviews, and the evidence on identity negotiation was thinner than for other adaptation dimensions. Eighth, statements about the Chinese digital environment, including access restrictions and the strengths of domestic tools, reflect participants' perceptions and were not independently verified.

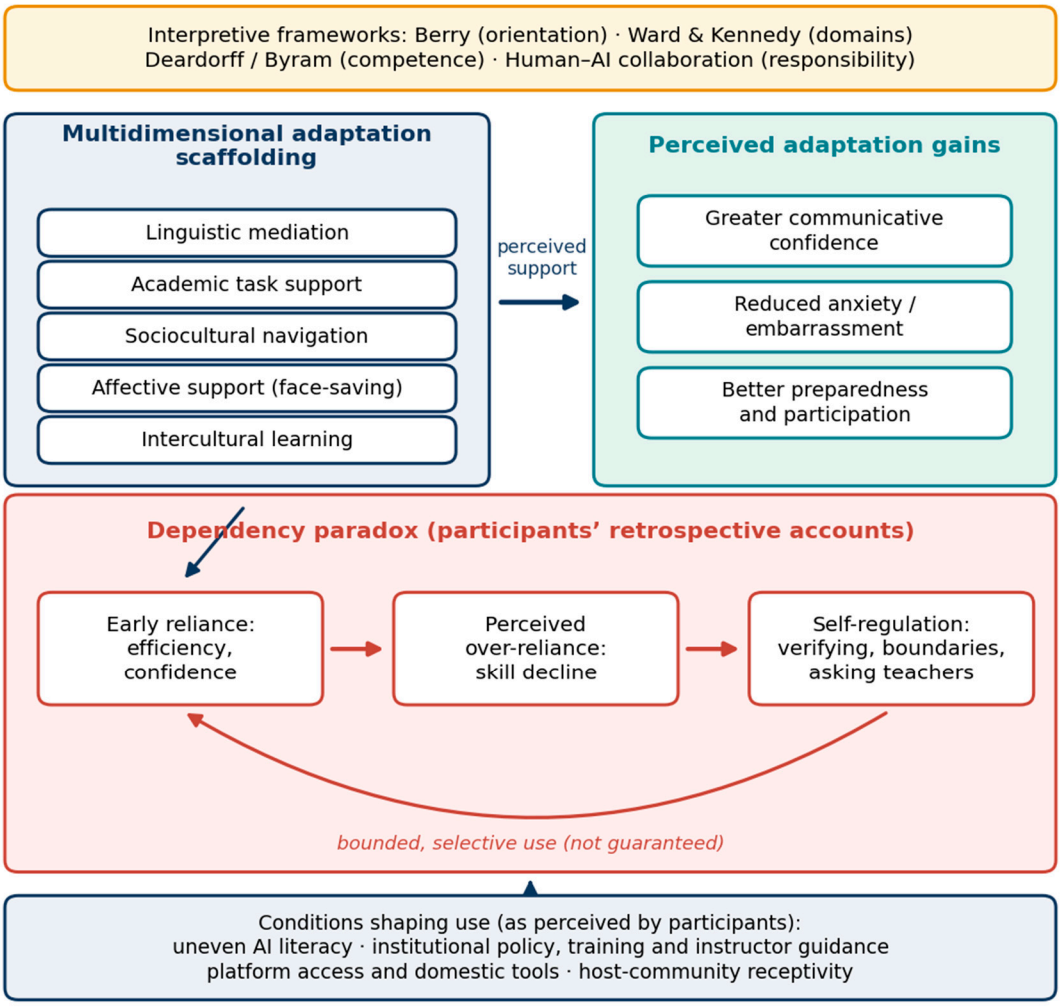


Figure 1. Conceptual model of AI-mediated adaptation and the dependency paradox among international students.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine how AI-mediated adaptation develops across different stages of international study. Comparative studies involving multiple host countries would help determine whether the patterns identified here are unique to China or reflect broader trends in international education. Mixed-methods and experimental studies could further investigate causal relationships between AI use, intercultural competence, psychological well-being, and academic adjustment. Finally, future research should explore how emerging domestic and international AI platforms differ in their support for multilingual and intercultural adaptation. Future studies might also examine privacy and data-security concerns directly, include students who do not use AI, compare experiences across nationalities and institutions, and explore identity negotiation in greater depth.

7. Conclusions

This study suggests that AI was perceived by participants as an important component of their adaptation experiences in Chinese higher education. Participants described AI as going beyond academic support to assist with language learning, sociocultural navigation, emotional support, and intercultural learning. They perceived AI as reducing uncertainty, increasing confidence, and broadening access to cultural knowledge, which they linked to both psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Because the data are self-reported and cross-sectional, these are perceived rather than demonstrated outcomes.

However, participants also identified challenges, including misinformation, algorithmic bias, uneven AI literacy, and over-reliance on AI. These findings suggest that, in participants' view, successful adaptation depends not only on access to AI tools but also on critical AI literacy and reflective use. Furthermore, participants, chiefly those at University A, perceived the lack of clear institutional policies, training opportunities, and pedagogical guidance as limiting AI's potential and creating uncertainty regarding responsible use.

The study offers an interpretive contribution to acculturation and intercultural competence scholarship by conceptualising AI as a mediating resource in participants' reported adaptation processes. The notions of multidimensional adaptation scaffolding and the dependency paradox offer sensitising perspectives on how AI may simultaneously support and constrain adjustment, as perceived by participants. By focusing on Asian students in China, the study addresses an important gap in a literature dominated by Western contexts and highlights the influence of digital ecosystems on adaptation. Overall, AI should be viewed as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, authentic intercultural engagement and human relationships.

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