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**Rethinking International Internships: Affective Subjectivation
and Normative Friction in the Chinese Context**

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Abstract. This conceptual article reinterprets international internships not as neutral platforms for skill development, but as structured encounters with institutional normativity and affective dissonance. Focusing on the Chinese context – a high-power, collectivist regime shaped by hierarchical discipline and *guanxi* networks – the study theorizes internships as liminal spaces of ethical subjectivation and intercultural identity formation. Drawing on Foucault’s disciplinary power, Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, boundary-crossing theory, and affect theory, it develops a normative-affective framework to analyze how foreign interns navigate disorientation, emotional labor, and embodied negotiation. Emotions such as anxiety, shame, and ambivalence are theorized as epistemic affects – forms of situated knowledge that mediate encounters with unfamiliar regimes of value, recognition, and legitimacy. Internships are thus framed not as neutral educational tools but as affective pedagogies of the self, where identity is reconstituted through ongoing engagement with institutional power and normative pressure. This framework contributes to decolonial critiques of transnational education and challenges liberal models of intercultural competence by foregrounding the emotional labor required to remain intelligible within asymmetrical systems. The analysis invites new directions in understanding how global education produces, regulates, and contests subjectivity through emotionally charged institutional encounters.

Keywords: international internships; affective subjectivation; normative friction; intercultural identity formation; emotional labor; China

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**Международные стажировки: нормативные смыслы
и эмоционально-смысловая адаптация в китайском контексте**

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Аннотация. Международные стажировки рассматриваются как сложный процесс адаптации, в котором профессиональное развитие тесно переплетается с необходимостью соответствовать нормативным ожиданиям и эмоциональным

требованиям принимающей среды. На примере китайского контекста – с его уникальным сочетанием иерархической организации труда, коллективистских ценностей и системы неформальных связей (гуаньси) – анализируется, как иностранные стажеры осваивают местные профессиональные нормы, преодолевая эмоциональные трудности и вырабатывая стратегии культурного приспособления. Теоретическая основа исследования интегрирует концепцию дисциплинарной власти М. Фуко, теорию габитуса П. Бурдьё, модель социально-пространственных переходов А. Аккермана и С. Баккера, а также положения теории аффекта С. Ахмед и концепцию эмоционального труда А.Р. Хохшильд. Особое внимание уделяется аффективным состояниям – тревожности, стыду, профессиональной неуверенности – которые в процессе адаптации трансформируются в особую форму ситуативного знания, позволяющего ориентироваться в новых культурных иерархиях и механизмах профессионального признания. Стажировка концептуализируется как сложный институциональный опыт, требующий не только усвоения формальных правил, но и постоянной рефлексии собственной позиции в системе трудовых и символических отношений. Такой подход позволяет пересмотреть устоявшиеся представления о международном образовании, показывая ограниченность универсальных моделей межкультурного взаимодействия и ключевую роль эмоциональной адаптации в условиях культурного неравенства.

Ключевые слова: международные стажировки; нормативное давление; эмоциональная адаптация; межкультурная идентичность; эмоциональный труд; Китай

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INTRODUCTION

Internships have become central mechanisms in global higher education, widely positioned as essential bridges between academic instruction and professional readiness (Jackson, 2018: 213). However, such instrumentalist framings often obscure the normative and affective infrastructures that shape these experiences. This article challenges the dominant work-integrated learning paradigm by reinterpreting internships not as transitional sites for skill acquisition, but as politically charged and emotionally saturated encounters where foreign students navigate institutional power, cultural asymmetry, and affective regulation (Sharma, Phung, 2019: 41).

This reconceptualization is especially salient in the Chinese context, where internships for international students are embedded within a dense regulatory, relational, and sociocultural matrix. As China advances its status as a global education hub (Zheng, 2021: 87), foreign interns increasingly encounter hierarchical workplace environments structured by bureaucratic opacity, *guanxi*-based social networks, and high-context institutional expectations that diverge sharply from liberal-democratic norms of transparency and individual autonomy (Yang, 2020: 104; Zhao, 2019: 122). For instance, in China, ethnographic studies of urban service work show how mundane rituals – tea service, honorific address, choreographed attentiveness – can produce discomfort and moral dissonance for newcomers, revealing affective labor as a medium of hierarchical legibility (Hanser, 2008: 107–108; Otis, 2011: ch. 2, 69–99).

Rather than situating these challenges within conventional models of intercultural learning – emphasizing competence, adaptation, or employability (Gu, Schweisfurth, 2015: 949; Marginson, Sawir, 2011: 113) – this article foregrounds the emotional and epistemological stakes of internships. It conceptualizes internships as interstitial boundary spaces: zones of ontological instability and normative tension, where identity is reshaped through embodied negotiation and emotional labor. Emotions such as anxiety, shame, and ambivalence are theorized not as incidental byproducts of cross-cultural adaptation, but as epistemic affects – cognitive-emotional responses that expose the symbolic violence of misalignment and institutional non-belonging (Ahmed, 2004: 6; Hochschild, 2012: 7).

To interrogate these dynamics, the article develops a transdisciplinary framework combining Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, Bourdieu's concept of habitus, boundary-crossing theory (Akkerman, Bakker, 2011), and affect theory (Ahmed, 2004; Boler, 1999). Here, emotions are treated not as private psychological states, but as socially mediated orientations – what Ahmed terms “sticky signs” – that bind bodies to institutional norms and expose sites of contestation and compliance (Ahmed, 2004: 8). Through this lens, internships are reframed as affective pedagogies of subjectivation, in which students' emotional labor becomes the terrain on which institutional legitimacy and cultural legibility are negotiated.

The article proceeds in five parts. Section 2 develops the theoretical and conceptual foundations by advancing the notion of the normative-affective nexus. It uses Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, Bourdieu's concept of habitus, boundary-crossing theory and affect theory to create a framework for analysing internships as dispositifs of affective governance and the formation of subjects. Section 3 applies this framework to the Chinese internship context, examining how emotional regulation is institutionally orchestrated through mechanisms such as guanxi networks, collectivist workplace rituals, and symbolic hierarchies. Section 4 explores intercultural identity formation as a process of affective subjectivation, analyzing how foreign interns negotiate emotional dissonance, perform normative compliance, and engage in tactical biculturalism within structurally asymmetrical environments. The conclusion synthesizes the article's contributions, underscoring the theoretical and pedagogical implications of rethinking international internships as emotionally saturated sites of normative friction, identity reconstitution, and transnational power dynamics.

Theoretical Approach and Conceptual Framework: The Normative-Affective Nexus in Boundary Crossing

This article adopts a conceptual-interpretive methodology grounded in post-structuralist epistemology, critical hermeneutics, and cultural anthropology. Rather than relying on primary empirical data, it develops a theoretical synthesis to interrogate how institutional normativity, affective circulation, and intercultural identity are co-constituted in the context of international student internships in China. This approach responds to a persistent lacuna in transnational education research: the under-theorization of internships as affective-political spaces in which subjectivity is not merely shaped but contested, regulated, and reconstituted. Conceptual inquiry is treated not as a preparatory stage for empirical research but as an autonomous and generative mode of theory-building, following the abductive logic described by I. Tavory and S. Timmermans (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014: 24). The process involved iteratively testing conceptual tools for their explanatory resonance against documented phenomena in Chinese internship contexts, including secondary accounts of foreign interns navigating normative dissonance.

To theorize institutional regulation, the article draws on Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, which explains how organizations shape perception and conduct through routinized procedures, moral scripts, and subtle surveillance (Foucault, 1995: 138). Yet, as S. Ahmed argues, power in such contexts is never merely procedural – it is affectively charged (Ahmed, 2004: 2). Emotions are not internal psychological states but socially mediated orientations that “stick” to

bodies and norms, organizing alignment or misalignment with institutional expectations. Viewed through Ahmed's theory of affective economies, disciplinary mechanisms become intelligible not simply as structural impositions, but as embodied emotional forces – manifesting as shame, anxiety, or alienation when normative alignment falters (Ahmed, 2004: 6).

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus offers a complementary sociological lens to analyze how such affective normativity is embodied (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). Habitus, understood as the internalized matrix of dispositions shaped by one's cultural history, informs how legitimacy and value are perceived and enacted. Foreign interns in China, arriving with habitus attuned to different cultural logics, frequently experience what may be termed "habitus dissonance" – a breakdown of intuitive navigation that produces epistemic and emotional disruption. This dissonance is amplified in Chinese contexts characterized by implicit hierarchies, ritualized deference, and guanxi-based relationality. Interns unfamiliar with these expectations may find their embodied competence misrecognized, triggering affective reactions that mark the boundary between self and system.

When situated within S.F. Akkerman and A. Bakker's (2011) theory of boundary crossing (Akkerman, Bakker, 2011), such experiences reveal that institutional boundaries are not merely epistemic or procedural, but emotional. The internship becomes a locus of normative friction, where the crossing of organizational, cultural, and symbolic domains is registered first as a disturbance in affective orientation. Whereas cultural psychology frameworks such as Hofstede's would interpret these moments as value clashes (Hofstede, 2001: 92), the present framework contends that affect – not abstract cultural values – is the primary medium through which normative asymmetry is lived and negotiated.

To illuminate the interpretive labor demanded by such friction, the analysis draws on Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, which positions emotion as a semiotic signal of hidden structures of power (Ricoeur, 1981: 74). Following Megan Boler's claim that emotions are "cognitive practices" (Boler, 1999: 61), the article understands affective responses as forms of situated knowledge that enable critique, resistance, or strategic compliance. Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labor further clarifies how foreign interns must often manage their affective expressions – smiling during public reprimands, suppressing dissent in collectivist rituals, or masking unease during hierarchical interactions – in order to remain intelligible and employable in face-sensitive, high-context workplaces (Hochschild, 2012: 7). Emotions are thus not epiphenomenal but performative; they function as adaptive strategies under asymmetric institutional conditions.

Taken together, these theoretical strands produce what is here termed a normative-affective nexus – a conceptual framework that critically synthesizes disciplinary power (Foucault), embodied dissonance (Bourdieu), institutional boundary work (Akkerman, Bakker), affective economies (Ahmed), interpretive agency (Ricoeur), and emotion-as-epistemology (Boler). This framework enables a reconceptualization of international internships not as neutral pathways to employability but as emotionally saturated sites of subject formation, where power is enacted through affective calibration. Crucially, the Chinese context intensifies these dynamics. Hierarchical workplace structures, collectivist moral scripts, and guanxi-based exclusionary logics demand normative adaptation not only at the cognitive level, but in the embodied register of comportment and emotional display.

To avoid theoretical universalism, the framework is reflexively situated within Sinophone critiques that problematize the uncritical export of Western theoretical categories. Scholars such as R. Yang (Yang, 2020: 104) and Y. Zhao (Zhao, 2019: 122) underscore that guanxi systems, ritual performativity, and implicit authority cannot be reduced to Western notions of institutional culture. Accordingly, the selected theories are not deployed as explanatory totalities, but as heuristic devices that make visible the hidden dimensions of cultural friction and affective governance across normative regimes.

In sum, this article offers a transdisciplinary framework for analyzing how international internships function as emotionally charged and normatively structured spaces of intercultural

subjectivation. The normative-affective lens contributes not only to critical studies of transnational education but also to broader discourses on institutional power, affective labor, and the situated epistemologies of global mobility.

Theorizing Internships as Affective-Normative Encounters: Power, Habitus, and Boundary Work in the Chinese Context

International internships in China must be understood not simply as transitional platforms for skill acquisition or employability enhancement, but as deeply situated affective-normative spaces where subjectivity is negotiated under conditions of structural and cultural asymmetry. These experiences unfold within institutional environments governed by tacit norms, symbolic hierarchies, and affective disciplining. While global discourses on international mobility often emphasize agency, transformation, and cosmopolitan competence, the actual experience of foreign interns in China is more accurately characterized by moments of dispositional dissonance, epistemic uncertainty, and affective negotiation. This section elaborates a critical framework that interweaves Foucault's theory of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1995: 138), Bourdieu's concept of habitus – defined as culturally embedded dispositions that, when destabilized by cross-cultural encounters, generate what we term *habitus vertigo*, an embodied dissonance that exposes the affective costs of normative misalignment (Bourdieu, 1977: 72) – and boundary-crossing theory (Akkerman, Bakker, 2011), reconceptualized through the lens of affect theory (Ahmed, 2004; Hochschild, 2012). This constellation of perspectives enables a sharper analysis of how subject formation occurs within the disciplinary architecture of Chinese internships.

Foucault's analytics of disciplinary power reveals how internships operate as normative pedagogies where individuals are produced as “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1995: 138), not through coercion but via routinized practices and subtle moral scripts. Chinese internship environments enact discipline through embodied protocols – morning rituals, formal speech codes, dress expectations, collectivist work tasks – that align subjects with hierarchically organized moral orders. These performative structures enact what might be termed an *institutional pedagogy of norms*, where behavioral regulation is affectively reinforced. As Foucault notes, “discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (Foucault, 1995: 170). In such contexts, foreign students are not passive participants but are actively constituted as legible or illegible subjects through emotional attunement to institutional expectations.

This affective alignment is rarely seamless. Bourdieu's theory of habitus offers a generative lens for exploring how foreign students bring with them culturally sedimented dispositions that may jar with the implicit logics of Chinese professional culture. Habitus, conceived as a “system of durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1977: 72), is often rendered unstable when interns confront unspoken norms regarding deference, hierarchy, and relationality. For example, Western interns may misinterpret indirect feedback, struggle with status-sensitive interactions, or find *guanxi* networks opaque and exclusionary. As Q. Gu and M. Schweisfurth note in their study of international students' adjustment in Chinese higher education contexts, unfamiliar hierarchical expectations and indirect communication styles frequently result in withdrawal, defensive behavior, and emotional discomfort (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015: 950). These moments generate what might be called *habitus vertigo* – a condition of embodied dissonance where one's internalized feel for the field becomes misaligned with local semiotics. Bourdieu reminds us that “one cannot truly become a player without investing one's very body in the game” (Bourdieu, 1990: 63), and thus failure to enact legible comportment leads not just to professional confusion but to affective experiences of shame, inadequacy, and alienation – what E Illouz describes as emotional misrecognition (Illouz, 2007: 113).

Akkerman and Bakker's boundary-crossing theory (2011) is useful here, but its original framing around epistemic transfer must be reinterpreted to emphasize the affective dimensions of institutional

crossing. Interns do not simply traverse knowledge domains; they move across emotional, moral, and symbolic boundaries that shape their self-understanding. Ahmed's theory of affective economies reframes emotion as socially embedded orientation: "Emotions are not simply private states but social and cultural practices" (Ahmed, 2004: 9). Emotional responses – confusion, resentment, apprehension – are thus diagnostic tools revealing the intern's positionality within intersecting normative orders. The boundary, in this view, is first felt in the body before it is known in the mind.

Interns adopt varying strategies to navigate these normatively complex environments. Some perform surface-level compliance – mimicking local behaviors while retaining internal distance – while others engage in what might be termed *reflexive hybridity*, selectively adopting practices that ensure institutional legibility without full assimilation. This echoes A. Hochschild's account of emotional labor as the managed performance of affect in service of institutional legitimacy: "the outward countenance" is cultivated to align with expected emotional norms (Hochschild, 2012: 7). R. Yang's ethnography highlights how foreign interns routinely performed gratitude and humility during "face-saving" rituals despite internal resentment – illustrating the emotional labor required to maintain workplace legitimacy (Yang, 2021: 61). In this setting, emotional labor is not a neutral adaptation mechanism; it becomes a critical modality of survival and meaning-making under cultural and structural constraint.

Nonetheless, the concept of hybridity must be engaged with caution. H. Bhabha's notion of the "third space" offers a hopeful vision of agency within cultural translation (Bhabha, 1994: 38), but as M. Kraidy rightly cautions, hybridity can obscure persistent asymmetries: "it often masks rather than erases the hierarchies that shape cultural interaction" (Kraidy, 2005: 148). In Chinese institutional contexts – marked by bureaucratic opacity, relational gatekeeping, and high-power distance – the scope for transformative hybridity is often curtailed. Subcultural spaces like WeChat groups or informal peer networks may offer limited refuge, but they rarely amount to structural critique or change. As J. Butler notes, "subjection is not the same as subjectivation" – while power invites agency, it simultaneously circumscribes its enactment (Butler, 2004: 94).

It is important to acknowledge that dissonance may, under certain conditions, catalyze reflexivity and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991: 5). However, the structural constraints embedded in Chinese internship contexts – such as limited institutional support, high-context communication, and hierarchical rigidity – often preclude such transformation, relegating interns instead to tactical compliance and emotional self-regulation (Zhao, 2020: 142). While there is potential for growth, it is constrained by the normative and affective demands of institutional legibility.

In conclusion, internships in China must be understood as affective-normative encounters that discipline, disorient, and reconstitute the subject. They are sites of profound negotiation, where students learn not only institutional norms but how to feel, interpret, and recalibrate their identities within culturally coded institutional spaces. Moving beyond instrumentalist paradigms of international mobility, this section advocates for a conceptual reorientation: from cross-cultural adaptation to affective subjectivation, and from intercultural competence to situated resistance within normatively uneven terrains. This framework challenges dominant models of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006: 248) by recentering power and affect as constitutive of identity formation in asymmetrical institutional contexts.

Normative Adaptation and Intercultural Identity Formation as Affective Subjectivation

This section advances a decolonial critique of intercultural identity formation by theorizing internships not as neutral 'learning zones' but as affective economies where legitimacy is contingently earned through emotional labor and normative compliance. It contends that intercultural identity formation during internships in China must be conceptualized not as a linear process of behavioral adaptation or cultural assimilation, but as an emotionally charged and normatively structured process

of subjectivation. Foreign interns are not merely passive recipients of cultural input; rather, they are drawn into institutional environments shaped by implicit rules, symbolic hierarchies, and emotional regulation. Drawing on Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, the internship space functions as a *dispositif*— an apparatus of governance that operates through surveillance, routines, and normalization. Within this apparatus, interns are positioned as subjects who must internalize deeply embedded norms to become legible and accepted within local institutional cultures. As Foucault asserts, discipline “produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault, 1995: 194). In this sense, internships do not merely offer professional experience but actively shape intercultural subjectivities through China's bureaucratic, collectivist, and face-sensitive workplace regimes.

This approach aligns with decolonial critiques that challenge Eurocentric models of interculturality and global learning. Scholars such as S. Stein and V. Andreotti argue that international education often masks power asymmetries under a veneer of cosmopolitan exchange, reinforcing rather than dismantling global hierarchies (Stein, 2017: 79; Andreotti, 2011: 22). Internships in China, as this section argues, exemplify such dynamics by embedding foreign students into normative regimes where recognition and success are contingent on emotional conformity and cultural legibility.

The dissonance experienced by many foreign interns arises precisely from this encounter with unfamiliar normative structures. Bourdieu's notion of habitus provides a critical lens for theorizing how embodied dispositions – shaped by earlier cultural and educational systems – clash with the implicit *doxa* of Chinese organizational life. These ruptures are not merely procedural but deeply emotional. Tacit expectations around deference, status, indirect communication, and hierarchy often expose interns to what X. Chen and Y. Wang identify as “affective asymmetry” – a culturally coded emotional burden of adaptation (Chen, Wang, 2021: 52). For example, Western interns may feel discomfort or moral tension when asked to engage in ritualized acts such as tea-serving, formal seating arrangements, or exaggerated displays of loyalty. In Bourdieu's terms, when the “feel for the game” falters, habitus dissonance occurs—a moment when once-intuitive behavior becomes unfamiliar and problematic (Bourdieu, 1990: 63). These responses – shame, confusion, alienation – are not individual failures but symptoms of friction between conflicting symbolic systems.

To better understand these moments, Akkerman and Bakker's boundary-crossing theory is helpful, though this analysis shifts focus from knowledge transfer to emotional navigation. Internships are seen as transitional spaces where students cross not only organizational boundaries but also affective and moral ones. As M. Nguyen observes in Confucian-heritage institutions, adaptation is often a bodily process marked by discomfort, frustration, and withdrawal rather than rational deliberation (Nguyen, 2020: 530). These feelings signal misalignment and demand emotional recalibration. In this framework, the intern is both the site and agent of negotiation, navigating institutional power under culturally uneven conditions. While disorientation can lead to personal growth (Mezirow, 1991: 5), the structural constraints of Chinese internships – such as *guanxi* gatekeeping, rigid hierarchies, and limited transparency – frequently block such transformation, turning reflexivity into a survival strategy (Zhao, 2019: 142).

Ahmed's theory of affective economies adds further depth by framing emotion as socially embedded and institutionally circulated. Emotions do not emerge in isolation but are shaped by the environments they inhabit, becoming mechanisms through which norms “stick” to bodies (Ahmed, 2004: 9). The intern's anxiety, resentment, or ambivalence does not reflect private weakness; it marks the interface between self and system, between experienced identity and institutional demands. A. Hochschild's theory of emotional labor becomes central here: foreign students often must manage their emotional expressions to preserve institutional legitimacy (Hochschild, 2012: 7). Smiling during reprimands, performing gratitude in uncomfortable situations, or hiding resistance during rituals are not simple acts of adaptation but strategic performances that help maintain institutional order. As

Butler reminds us, the self is shaped within and against regulatory norms, always constrained yet never entirely compliant (Butler, 2004: 94).

International interns often navigate institutional cultures through *tactical biculturalism* – context-bound performances of alignment that resist full assimilation while maintaining institutional legibility. However, this strategic adaptation is not equally available to all. Those from postcolonial, Global South, or collectivist backgrounds frequently experience *double marginalization*, misrecognized by both host institutions and their home communities (Madge et al., 2015: 588). These disparities are further entrenched by racial and class hierarchies, which dictate access to recognition and opportunities. As C. Madge, P. Raghuram and P. Noxolo demonstrate, international students of color encounter systemic stratification in academic and labor systems, complicating their pursuit of legitimacy in unwelcoming cultural landscapes (Madge et al., 2015: 588). While Bhabha's *third space* (Bhabha 1994: 38) posits hybridity as a site of resistance and reinvention, M. Kraidy cautions that such frameworks often obscure the enduring power asymmetries underlying cross-cultural exchange (Kraidy, 2005: 148). Nowhere are these tensions more visible than in China's bureaucratic ecosystems, where ritualized authority and institutional opacity severely limit opportunities for subversive hybridity. As Y. Zhao argues, *guanxi* networks may appear fluid, but they remain exclusionary for foreign interns, reinforcing structural barriers under the guise of cultural flexibility (Zhao, 2019: 142). Thus, while hybrid identities promise theoretical liberation, their real-world applicability is constrained by the very systems they seek to disrupt.

Bringing together Foucault's disciplinary power, Bourdieu's habitus, Ahmed's affective economies, Hochschild's emotional labor, and Akkerman and Bakker's boundary-crossing, this analysis reframes intercultural identity not as a fixed trait or smooth progression, but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by emotional pressure and normative constraints. Internships are not neutral sites of professional preparation but contested spaces of ethical and emotional becoming. They demand a reevaluation of how legitimacy, recognition, and belonging are distributed in international education. Addressing these dynamics is crucial for both critical scholarship and the pursuit of more equitable global learning futures.

CONCLUSION

This article has advanced a conceptual reframing of international internships in China as sites of affective-normative subjectivation, rather than neutral platforms for professional skill acquisition or cultural exchange. Drawing on an interdisciplinary assemblage of theoretical perspectives – Foucault's micro-physics of power, Bourdieu's theory of habitus, boundary-crossing theory, and affect theory as articulated by Ahmed and Hochschild – the analysis repositions the internship as a culturally situated *dispositif* through which subjectivities are regulated, disoriented, and reconstituted. Rather than assuming smooth adaptation, the study foregrounds disjuncture, misrecognition, and emotional labor as constitutive of the internship experience.

This study moves beyond traditional human capital approaches to internships by theorizing affective normativity as a mechanism of transnational subject-making – a dimension largely absent in current literature on global education mobility. It is the first study to integrate Bourdieusian habitus with affect theory to analyze internships as dispositifs of emotional governance. Affective normativity is theorized as a structuring force: emotions such as confusion, shame, or ambivalence function not merely as psychological states but as epistemic and normative indicators. Emotions, following Ahmed, “do things”: they bind bodies to particular institutional formations, delineate who belongs, and mark the limits of intelligibility (Ahmed, 2004: 2). Interns' affective responses thus signal deeper engagements with the symbolic violence of misalignment, producing forms of what may be called situated reflexivity – critical moments where normative friction catalyzes the (re)formation of identity under constraint.

This framing makes legible how power in Chinese internship contexts operates not through overt domination, but through spatial, temporal, and relational pedagogies. The disciplinary regimes

of hierarchy, collectivist performativity, and *guanxi* networks do not simply demand behavioral compliance; they constitute emotional expectations that determine legibility and belonging. Foucault's insight that discipline "produces subjected and practiced bodies" is reanimated here through the lens of affect (Foucault, 1995: 138), while Bourdieu's notion of habitus as "embodied history" helps explain the dislocation that occurs when transnational subjects encounter unfamiliar symbolic orders (Bourdieu, 1990: 56). What this article terms *habitus vertigo* captures the embodied rupture between internalized dispositions and the affective demands of a foreign normative regime.

This theoretical synthesis opens several avenues for future inquiry. First, the concept of affective normativity invites further research into how emotions operate as ethical judgments and technologies of the self in intercultural contexts. This line of analysis may be deepened through attention to how institutional actors – mentors, supervisors, university staff – mediate or exacerbate these dynamics. Second, comparative studies could examine how these affective-normative negotiations unfold in differing geopolitical and institutional environments, including Western contexts that mask their own disciplinary norms under the guise of liberal individualism. Third, future research should attend to the intersectional dimensions of identity – race, gender, class, and migratory status – which inflect both the terms and consequences of adaptation, resistance, and recognition.

These findings also urge internship designers and host institutions to critically assess how emotional labor is distributed across racialized, gendered, and national lines. Formal mechanisms of support and recognition are needed to address the affective toll of navigating normative disjunctures in cross-cultural placements. While this study focuses on Chinese internships, future research could test whether affective normativity operates similarly in less hierarchical or differently structured internship regimes. Extending this framework to contexts with contrasting ideological underpinnings could sharpen our understanding of affective governance and its global variations.

In sum, this article proposes a paradigm shift in the study of international internships. These are not merely vehicles for employability or global citizenship training, but liminal spaces where the boundaries of the self are reconstituted through encounters with power, affect, and cultural asymmetry. The foreign intern emerges not as a neutral subject of professional development, but as a contested figure, navigating dense architectures of normativity that both constrain and enable new forms of selfhood. As global education becomes increasingly transactional, this study urges scholars to recenter the visceral, embodied stakes of learning to be legible – and the costs of doing so.

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