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Jianying Hao, Dzintra Iliško, Jānis Kudiņš

CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES FACED BY CHINESE MULTINATIONAL ENTERPRISES IN GLOBAL EXPANSION

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Chinese multinational enterprises (MNEs) are moving from export-based expansion to more embedded forms of international presence, including acquisitions, long-term projects, franchising, local production, and large retail networks. In this context, cross-cultural management is not a secondary issue but a daily operational condition. Subsidiaries must pass risk signals upward, justify and document decisions, maintain credible HR routines, and meet host-country expectations that may differ from headquarters practice. This article reviews recent literature on these challenges and develops a practical integration logic for subsidiary governance. Using a structured literature review and mechanism-oriented coding, the study identifies six recurring friction zones: leadership and authority, employee voice and escalation, communication and documentation, HR legitimacy in appraisal and promotion, HQ-subsidiary decision-right allocation, and institutional compliance and stakeholder expectations. The review shows that these frictions matter most when they weaken three basic conditions of effective coordination: reliable information flows, visible accountability, and credible rules. When these conditions weaken, firms face slower execution, higher coordination costs, weaker learning, greater turnover risk, and stronger stakeholder exposure, especially under heightened scrutiny and liability-of-origin pressures. The paper makes two main contributions. Theoretically, it connects cultural adaptation, institutional legitimacy, and capability development within one interface-based framework. Managerially, it translates recurring friction zones into practical tools such as decision-right mapping, protected escalation channels, decision logs, transparent HR criteria, compliance-visible procedures, and boundary-spanning roles. The study is based on published evidence and does not claim causal estimation; future research can test the proposed logic through comparative case studies and subsidiary-level indicators.

Keywords: Chinese multinational enterprises, cross-cultural management, subsidiary interfaces, governance design, employee voice, legitimacy, dynamic capabilities, operational dual embeddedness.

Ķīnas daudznacionālo uzņēmumu starpkultūru vadības izaicinājumi globālajā ekspansijā

Ķīnas daudznacionālie uzņēmumi (MNE) pāriet no eksporta balstītas izaugsmes uz vairāk iegremdētām starptautiskās klātbūtnes formām, tostarp iegādēm, ilgtermiņa projektiem, franšīzēm, vietējo ražošanu un plašiem mazumtirdzniecības tīkliem. Šajā kontekstā starpkultūru vadība nav sekundārs jautājums, bet gan ikdienas operacionāls nosacījums. Meitasuzņēmumiem ir jānodrošina risku signālu nodošana augšup, jāspēj pamatot un dokumentēt lēmumus, jāuztur ticamas HR rutīnas un jāatbilst uzņemošās valsts gaidām, kas var atšķirties no galvenā biroja prakses. Rakstā tiek pārskatīta jaunākā literatūra par šiem izaicinājumiem un izstrādāta praktiska meitasuzņēmumu pārvaldības integrācijas loģika, kas ir parādīta operacionālās integrācijas modelī. Izmantojot strukturētu literatūras pārskatu un mehānismu orientētu kodēšanu, pētījumā ir identificētas sešas atkārtotas berzes zonas: līderība un autoritāte, darbinieku balss un eskalācija, komunikācija un dokumentēšana, HR leģitimitāte vērtēšanā un paaugstināšanā, galvenā biroja un meitasuzņēmuma lēmumu tiesību sadale, kā arī institucionālā atbilstība un ieinteresēto pušu gaidas. Pārskats rāda, ka šīs berzes kļūst īpaši nozīmīgas tad, kad tās vājina trīs pamatnosacījumus efektīvai koordinācijai: uzticamas informācijas plūsmas, redzamu atbildību un ticamus noteikumus. Kad šie nosacījumi vājinās, uzņēmumi saskaras ar lēnāku izpildi, augstākām koordinācijas izmaksām, vājāku mācīšanos, lielāku darbinieku mainības risku un augstāku ieinteresēto pušu ekspozīciju, īpaši pastiprinātas uzraudzības un izcelsmes atbildības spiediena apstākļos. Rakstam ir divi galvenie ieguldījumi. Teorētiski tas vienā saskarņu ietvarā sasaista kultūras adaptāciju, institucionālo leģitimitāti un spēju attīstību. Praktiski tas pārvērš atkārtotās berzes zonas konkrētos instrumentos, piemēram, lēmumu tiesību kartēšanā, aizsargātos eskalācijas kanālos, lēmumu žurnālos, caurspīdīgos HR kritērijos, atbilstībai redzamās procedūrās un robežšķērsojošās lomās. Pētījums balstās uz publicētiem avotiem un nepretendē uz cēloņsakarību novērtējumu; turpmākie pētījumi var pārbaudīt piedāvāto loģiku, izmantojot salīdzinošas gadījumu analīzes un meitasuzņēmumu līmeņa indikatorus.

Atslēgvārdi: Ķīnas daudznacionālie uzņēmumi, starpkultūru vadība, meitasuzņēmumu saskarnes, pārvaldības dizains, darbinieku balss, leģitimitāte, dinamiskās spējas, operacionālā divējādā iegremdētība.

Introduction

Chinese multinational enterprises (MNEs) have moved from symbolic global ambition to large-scale international expansion, locally termed *chu hai* ("going overseas"). Growth is no longer driven mainly by export volumes; instead, it increasingly relies on embedded presence in host economies through local production, strategic acquisitions, franchising, and long-horizon project participation (Prashantham, Woetzel 2025). As a result, internationalization becomes less a question of "market entry" and more a question of operating stability: maintaining performance when core routines–decision rights, reporting practices, HR evaluation criteria, and control systems–must function under different institutional constraints and expectations.

Recent indicators illustrate both the scale and the governance intensity of this shift. In 2024, Chinese firms completed 24 GW of power projects in Belt and Road countries, reflecting the infrastructure-intensive and contract-governed character of contemporary outward expansion (Liew 2025). In the private sector, brands such as Mixue Bingcheng, operating more than 46,000 outlets worldwide, turn cross-cultural frontline management and service consistency into daily operational challenges (Devine 2025). Despite their heterogeneity, these modes–projects, acquisitions, and franchising–share a common feature: they multiply the interfaces where headquarters' assumptions about authority, coordination, and accountability meet host-country norms.

As Chinese firms expand, the primary obstacle is rarely entry as such, but the ability to run operations across heterogeneous environments. Cross-cultural management becomes a performance driver because it shapes how authority is exercised, how information moves through hierarchy, how dissent is handled, and whether HR systems are perceived as fair and legitimate. Research synthesis suggests that recurring friction emerges from gaps between Chinese managerial routines and host-country expectations, producing persistent problems in communication and decision-making (Chen, Wang 2019). These tensions intensify when home-country preferences for hierarchy and collectivism confront host-market norms of standardized procedures, transparency, and individual accountability (Hofstede 2001; Tsui et al. 2006). In both project and retail settings, the same managerial pattern can be interpreted differently: a centralized approval chain may be viewed as "responsible control" internally, but as "delay" or "avoidance of accountability" in contexts where responsibilities are expected to be explicitly assigned and documented.

Importantly, these problems are structural and recur across industries. Leadership practices may be contested where employees expect flatter hierarchies and participatory management. Communication styles can generate informational asymmetry: high-context, implicit messaging may reduce clarity in low-context environments where explicit articulation, documentation, and responsibility tracking are standard (Hall 1976). In operational terms, implicit coordination weakens traceability–who decided what, on which information, and how risks were escalated–especially when teams are dispersed across language boundaries and time zones. HR and performance evaluation systems may also lose credibility if perceived as relationship-based rather than rule-based, undermining trust and weakening learning loops between headquarters and subsidiaries (Hofstede et al. 2010; Trompenaars, Hampden-Turner 2012). Typical symptoms include reluctance to raise concerns upward, informal conflict avoidance, uneven enforcement of rules, and deterioration in the quality of feedback that headquarters receives from local units.

These cross-cultural frictions are inseparable from institutional requirements. Subsidiaries are evaluated not only by efficiency, but by conformity with local labor standards, compliance regimes, and stakeholder expectations. Institutional theory emphasizes that legitimacy conditions access to resources, stability of partnerships, and reputational resilience (Scott 2014). For Chinese MNEs, this creates a dual embeddedness tension: sustaining alignment with headquarters' strategic logic while adapting to host-country pressures that may be stricter, differently enforced, or politically sensitive

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(Chen, Wang 2019; Scott 2014). In practice, legitimacy pressures often materialize through procedural expectations: transparent recruitment and promotion criteria, predictable grievance channels, auditable procurement routines, and documented safety or quality processes. Where such expectations are strong, weak documentation and escalation mechanisms are interpreted not as "cultural difference," but as managerial risk.

At the same time, using national culture frameworks requires methodological discipline. Hofstede-type indices remain widely used to compare value tendencies relevant to leadership expectations and voice behavior (Hofstede 2001). However, scholars caution against rigid application: cultural indicators can be misread as fixed "country properties," while values vary within societies and may shift over time; therefore, such measures should be treated as probabilistic tendencies rather than deterministic explanations (McSweeney 2002; Taras et al. 2012; Minkov, Kaasa 2021). Culture-based arguments are most defensible when linked to concrete organizational mechanisms–how decision authority is allocated, how dissent is processed, and how HR judgments are justified–rather than used as standalone causal labels.

To move from diagnosis to actionable management, cross-cultural competence is better framed as a dynamic capability rather than a static "fit." This perspective emphasizes the capacity to sense local risks, seize opportunities through adaptive HR and governance choices, and reconfigure routines as experience accumulates across subsidiaries (Teece et al. 1997; Teece 2018). At the team level, diversity becomes an asset when firms institutionalize processes that convert cultural variety into stronger problem solving and knowledge integration instead of eroding trust and coordination (Stahl et al. 2010). Concretely, this concerns the organizational interfaces that make adaptation repeatable: boundary-spanning roles, translation of informal norms into formal procedures, decision-right mapping that clarifies who approves and who informs, and HR rules that translate fairness expectations into transparent criteria without undermining strategic coherence.

Against this background, the article systematizes the main cross-cultural management challenges faced by Chinese MNEs during global expansion and proposes an integration logic that links cultural adaptation, institutional legitimacy, and capability development. The analysis addresses two questions: which friction zones recur most consistently in Chinese firms' overseas operations, and which managerial mechanisms help subsidiaries adapt without losing strategic coherence across the multinational system (Chen, Wang 2019). This paper makes two main contributions. First, it offers a theoretical contribution by bringing together dispersed literature into six recurring friction zones at key subsidiary interfaces and explaining them through a common mechanism-based logic focused on information flow, accountability visibility, and rule credibility. Second, it offers a managerial contribution by translating that logic into practical governance tools for managers working across headquarters and subsidiaries.

Literature review

Recent scholarship increasingly treats national culture not as a static "country property," but as a set of probabilistic value tendencies whose organizational effects depend on context, occupational groups, and governance arrangements. This shift matters for multinational management because the same cultural tendency can produce different outcomes depending on how decision rights are allocated, how reporting lines are formalized, and which accountability tools are used at the subsidiary level. Methodological reassessments of Hofstede-type dimensions emphasize that validity hinges on how culture is operationalized rather than on mechanical use of country scores. For multinational studies, this implies that culture indices should be used to theorize specific mechanisms (e.g., how hierarchy shapes information flow, how disagreement is interpreted, how rule compliance is enforced), while explicitly stating inference limits and boundary conditions (Minkov, Kaasa 2021; Minkov 2023).

In line with this approach, current research calls for more precise conceptualizations of power distance so that “high/low PDI” labels translate into actionable managerial choices rather than remaining abstract generalizations (Adamovic 2023). In practice, this means linking power distance to concrete organizational design: for example, whether escalation is routed through formal channels or depends on personal access; whether meetings are structured to solicit dissent; whether documentation is treated as an expected routine or a sign of distrust. Without this translation from value tendencies to organizational mechanisms, culture frameworks risk being used descriptively rather than diagnostically (Minkov, Kaasa 2021; Minkov 2023).

A substantial research stream links cultural differences to employee voice and the quality of decision-relevant information reaching managers. Evidence suggests that willingness to speak up is not merely an individual trait but also a relational and cultural fit issue, shaped by expectations about authority and the “cost” of disagreement. When leader–subordinate power distance values are misaligned, employees are less likely to raise concerns and provide early warnings, weakening subsidiaries’ learning and risk detection (Guzman, Fu 2022). This is particularly consequential in cross-border operations where headquarters depends on local units for timely signals about regulatory shifts, labor relations, supplier quality, safety incidents, or reputational issues. If these signals are filtered by hierarchy, decision quality deteriorates not because managers lack competence, but because relevant information arrives late, incomplete, or strategically softened.

Recent studies further indicate that participative leadership does not automatically stimulate voice; its effectiveness is culturally contingent. Simply flattening formal hierarchy may not increase upward communication in high power distance environments, because employees can interpret invitations to speak as symbolic rather than protective, especially when performance evaluation remains discretionary (Toufighi et al. 2024). Even under ambiguous threats, silence may persist, highlighting the need for formal routines that legitimize escalation and make problem reporting culturally acceptable (Park et al. 2024). In operational terms, these routines include: standardized escalation steps, documented “issue logs,” pre-defined thresholds for reporting incidents, and explicit non-retaliation rules embedded into HR and project governance. Such mechanisms reduce ambiguity about *who may speak, when, and with what consequences*, turning voice from a personal risk into an organizational practice (Guzman, Fu 2022; Park et al. 2024).

Research on organizational culture confirms that it coordinates action through shared norms of fairness, influence, and the credibility of rules. These mechanisms become critical during international expansion, where corporate routines are filtered through local expectations and where employees evaluate not only outcomes but also procedural justice (Tadesse Bogale, Debela 2024). In the Chinese MNE context, studies repeatedly identify friction zones that do not disappear with operational experience: indirect versus explicit communication, norms around authority and dissent, and the perceived fairness of HR practices such as promotion and appraisal systems (Chen, Wang 2019). These are not “soft” frictions in the narrow sense; they shape core organizational functions–learning, coordination, retention, and compliance discipline–especially when subsidiaries are expected to implement standardized processes.

Consequently, HR legitimacy must be intentionally constructed. Firms require transparent criteria and locally credible feedback loops to prevent trust erosion and elevated turnover in foreign subsidiaries (Rožman et al. 2023). This legitimacy problem often becomes visible through recurring patterns: high performers disengage when appraisal logic is opaque; middle managers avoid documenting disagreements to preserve relationships; staff interpret inconsistently applied rules as favoritism; and headquarters receives overly optimistic reports because local teams treat negative information as politically risky. In such conditions, even technically well-designed governance tools can fail if employees perceive them as instruments of control rather than as predictable rules that protect fairness and learning (Tadesse Bogale, Debela 2024; Chen, Wang 2019; Rožman et al. 2023).

Cultural tensions often intensify when they intersect with institutional requirements. Institutional theory treats legitimacy as a prerequisite for stable partnerships and resource access; therefore, cultural friction rarely remains a "communication problem" and can quickly escalate into compliance and stakeholder risk when host-country expectations concern accountability, documentation, and labor standards (Scott 2014). For Chinese MNEs, this produces a dual-embeddedness challenge: subsidiaries must remain aligned with headquarters' strategic logic while meeting host-country standards for transparency, participation, and accountability (Chen, Wang 2019). This constraint is practical rather than theoretical: it affects procurement procedures, reporting rules, grievance mechanisms, audit readiness, and the credibility of managerial decisions in the eyes of external stakeholders.

Comparative work on cross-border projects supports the claim that cultural distance affects coordination and performance, especially when governance expectations diverge (Zhao, Kudiņš 2025). In project environments, the divergence often concentrates around decision authority and documentation: host partners may expect explicit responsibility matrices, traceable approvals, and standardized incident reporting, while headquarters routines may rely more on relational coordination and implicit authority. When these expectations collide, operational delays, dispute escalation, and reputational exposure are not anomalies but predictable outcomes of misaligned governance assumptions (Scott 2014; Zhao, Kudiņš 2025).

Literature from 2020–2025 increasingly frames cross-cultural success as an organizational capability rather than a one-time "fit" achieved at market entry. Firms must develop repeatable routines for sensing local risks, translating headquarters intent into locally legitimate practices, and updating these practices as experience accumulates across subsidiaries. This shift aligns with dynamic capabilities theory, where sustained performance derives from the ability to reconfigure resources and routines rather than maintain static alignment (Teece 2018). Operationally, evidence that cultural dimensions influence project outcomes supports treating cross-cultural management as a formal system of routines rather than an informal "soft" issue.

At the workplace level, diversity management research similarly argues for moving beyond "managing differences" toward creating inclusive, rule-consistent environments that protect coordination and legitimacy in multicultural settings (Baleviciene 2022). For Chinese MNEs, this means institutionalizing mechanisms that convert cultural variety into decision-relevant knowledge: structured problem-solving forums, standardized documentation practices, transparent HR criteria, and governance routines that normalize escalation. Under this perspective, cultural frictions are not removed by training alone; they are reduced when organizations redesign interfaces–how decisions are proposed, challenged, justified, and recorded–so that collaboration remains stable even when expectations about authority differ (Teece 2018; Baleviciene 2022).

Overall, the 2020–2025 literature highlights three points. First, culture frameworks are most useful when applied to specific mechanisms such as voice and legitimacy, and when measurement discipline and inference limits are explicit (Minkov, Kaasa 2021; Adamovic 2023). Second, orientations such as power distance shape the reliability of information flows from subsidiaries to decision makers at headquarters, especially through voice behavior under risk and ambiguity (Guzman, Fu 2022; Toufighi et al. 2024; Park et al. 2024). Third, cultural friction is tightly coupled with institutional legitimacy and therefore requires structured integration rather than ad hoc fixes (Scott 2014; Zhao, Kudiņš 2025).

A key gap is that these elements–culture measurement, employee voice, HR legitimacy, and institutional pressure–are often studied in parallel rather than integrated into a single operational logic tailored to Chinese MNEs. This article addresses the gap by systematizing recurring friction zones and proposing an adaptation model grounded in the dual-embeddedness constraint, linking cultural adaptation with legitimacy and capability development (Chen, Wang 2019; Teece 2018). The proposed integration emphasizes not only *what* frictions occur, but *how* they persist through organizational interfaces (decision rights, escalation routines, documentation discipline, and HR credibility) that shape information quality and coordination stability in host environments (Chen, Wang 2019; Scott 2014).

Research methodology

This study uses a structured literature review and concept-driven synthesis to examine the cross-cultural management challenges faced by Chinese multinational enterprises (MNEs) during global expansion. The aim is not simply to list cultural differences, but to identify recurring friction zones, explain the mechanisms behind them, and show how they affect subsidiary governance under the dual-embeddedness constraint. The unit of analysis is therefore not "culture" as an abstract national trait, but the organizational interfaces through which cultural differences become operational: decision rights, escalation and reporting routines, communication explicitness, documentation discipline, and HR evaluation rules. The review protocol follows systematic review principles adapted to management and organization studies (Tranfield et al. 2003; Denyer, Tranfield 2009), while the synthesis stage follows integrative review logic oriented toward theory-building rather than causal testing (Torraco 2005; Snyder 2019).

The evidence base consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly monographs, and high-quality review papers in international business, cross-cultural management, human resource management, and organization studies. Retrieval was conducted through major academic databases (including Scopus and Web of Science) and complemented by targeted searches in publisher platforms and Google Scholar to capture both foundational “anchor” works and recent contributions. Search strings were iteratively refined around mechanism-relevant constructs and their close variants, covering (1) Chinese MNE internationalization modes (subsidiaries, cross-border projects, acquisitions, alliances) and (2) interface-level mechanisms (power distance, authority, voice and silence, cross-cultural communication, documentation and accountability visibility, HRM legitimacy, appraisal and fairness, dual embeddedness, legitimacy, compliance). No rigid publication-year limitation was imposed; instead, recency was used pragmatically to represent current debates while preserving conceptual continuity through classic sources when required for theoretical anchoring (Snyder 2019; Tranfield et al. 2003).

Screening proceeded in two stages (title/abstract and full-text review). Duplicate records were removed, and each included source was checked for bibliographic integrity by verifying DOI/ISBN and publisher-level availability. A relevance-and-rigor filter was applied: studies were retained only when the empirical setting and constructs were described clearly enough to support mechanism inference (e.g., how authority arrangements shaped voice behavior; how communication norms affected accountability visibility; how HR rules affected perceived fairness and learning loops). Transparency of selection and reporting decisions was maintained using PRISMA-style logic (identification, screening, eligibility, inclusion) to document exclusions and reduce procedural opacity (Page et al. 2021). Where industry reports or reputable media were used, they served only as contextual vignettes and were included solely when the outlet, publication date, and stable access route were verifiable; importantly, they were not treated as evidence for mechanism claims.

Eligibility criteria were mechanism-oriented. Studies were included if they (i) empirically examined Chinese firms operating abroad (subsidiaries, cross-border projects, acquisitions, alliances), (ii) provided mechanism-based explanations relevant to cross-cultural management in multinational settings (hierarchy and voice constraints; communication and accountability visibility; HRM legitimacy; headquarters–subsidiary governance), or (iii) offered transferable propositions for managing cultural and institutional heterogeneity. The third criterion was applied conservatively: transferability required explicit linkage between constructs and organizational routines so that propositions could be translated into repeatable integration tools rather than remain purely descriptive.

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Exclusion criteria removed macroeconomic trade and investment analyses without managerial mechanisms, studies focused exclusively on domestic Chinese operations without multinational governance implications, and opinion pieces lacking transparent methods.

For analysis, the study used hybrid coding. Deductive coding operationalized an initial mechanism map derived from core cross-cultural management literature, while inductive coding captured recurrent themes emerging across industries and host environments. Friction zones were treated as analytically stable categories only when supported by cross-study convergence (Braun, Clarke 2006). To reduce interpretive drift, code definitions were specified in a codebook with inclusion/exclusion rules and short operational indicators (e.g., "voice constraint" coded only when inhibited upward communication or risk reporting was described; "documentation/accountability visibility" coded only when traceability of decisions, responsibilities, or procedures was a stated issue). Reliability and transparency were strengthened through rule-based memoing and an audit-trail consolidation process that merged overlapping constructs while preserving distinctions necessary for mechanism inference (Miles et al. 2014).

Synthesis was conducted through cross-study comparison to identify stable patterns and boundary conditions and to build an operational integration model linking cultural mechanisms (authority, voice, communication routines), organizational systems (HRM and governance interfaces), and institutional pressures (legitimacy and compliance). The result is a set of repeatable integration tools aligned with the most persistent friction zones: structured escalation channels, transparent appraisal and promotion routines, clear decision-right mapping between headquarters and subsidiaries, and bicultural boundary-spanning roles that translate intent and expectations across interfaces. The study therefore offers a mechanism-based interpretive framework rather than direct empirical proof of causal effects. Its claims remain bounded by the available literature, publication bias, and uneven sectoral coverage, although these limitations were reduced through multi-database retrieval, transparent screening logic, and strict separation of contextual vignettes from peer-reviewed evidence (Okoli 2015).

Results: systematic friction and the logic of integration

The reviewed evidence indicates that Chinese multinational expansion has shifted from episodic exporting to long-horizon embedded presence in host economies, including project delivery, acquisition-led entry, franchising, local production, and large-scale retail scaling (Prashantham, Woetzel 2025). This expansion profile increases the "contact surface" where managerial routines repeatedly encounter local expectations across sites, roles, and governance levels. Sector signals also illustrate this breadth across infrastructure projects and consumer franchises that depend on standardized service routines across diverse labour markets (Liew 2025; Devine 2025).

At the operational level, cross-cultural issues appear not as isolated misunderstandings but as recurring constraints that affect execution speed, coordination costs, HR stability, and the reliability of HQ-subsidiary feedback loops (Chen, Wang 2019). The review shows that culture becomes performance-relevant when it shapes three basic conditions of effective coordination: the quality of decision-relevant information, the visibility of accountability through documentation, and the credibility of rules inside subsidiaries. When one or more of these conditions weakens, adaptive capacity declines even when strategic intent and resources remain in place.

This general pattern becomes clearer when the recurring problem areas are considered more systematically. Across the screened literature, cross-cultural challenges concentrate in recurring friction zones that function as stable operational interfaces. These are points where differences convert into predictable breakdowns in coordination and legitimacy, rather than remaining "soft" background conditions (Chen, Wang 2019; Hofstede 2001). Each zone corresponds to a mechanism that disrupts either information flow (what reaches decision makers, how early, and how accurately) or rule credibility (whether procedures are treated as fair, predictable, and binding).

Table 1 systematizes the six zones by linking each to a dominant mechanism, a typical subsidiary-level manifestation, and a repeatable integration tool. The logic is operational: it translates "cultural difference" into a mechanism, and then into a routine that can be institutionalized, monitored, and improved.

Table 1

Six recurring friction zones in Chinese MNEs' overseas operations: mechanisms, manifestations, integration tools

Friction zone	Dominant mechanism	Typical manifestation in subsidiaries	Repeatable integration tool
Leadership expectations, authority enactment	Authority is evaluated through local legitimacy norms	Hierarchical enactment is interpreted as low transparency or weak procedural justification where employees expect participation and explicit rationales (Hofstede 2001; House et al. 2004)	Decision-rationale routines, meeting protocols that allocate voice, documented delegation and role clarity
Employee voice, dissent, escalation	Status constraints suppress weak-signal reporting	Early warnings and compliance signals are not escalated; "open communication" messages do not translate into speaking up without protected routines (Guzman, Fu 2022; Toufighi et al. 2024)	Formal escalation channels, non-retaliation safeguards, structured pre-mortems, anonymous reporting routes
Communication explicitness, documentation discipline	High-context messaging reduces traceability	Task interpretation diverges; accountability becomes unclear; auditable trails are weak in environments expecting explicit documentation (Hall 1976)	Documentation standards, written decision logs, responsibility matrices, checklist-based handovers
HRM legitimacy (appraisal, promotion, fairness)	Procedural justice is contested	Appraisal and promotion are perceived as opaque or relationship-driven; trust declines, turnover rises, coordination costs increase (Tsui et al. 2006; Rožman et al. 2023)	Transparent criteria, calibrated review cycles, locally credible feedback loops, appeals procedures
HQ–subsidiary governance interface	Misaligned decision rights and control logic	Unclear autonomy vs control; reporting burdens crowd out learning; strategic goals are not "translated" into locally credible routines (Chen, Wang 2019)	Decision-right mapping, interface governance, KPI harmonization with local constraints, boundary-spanning roles
Institutional compliance, stakeholder expectations	Legitimacy constraints shape feasible routines	Cultural friction escalates into compliance and stakeholder risk where transparency, grievance handling, and auditability are expected (Scott 2014; Chen, Wang 2019)	Compliance-visible processes, grievance mechanisms, audit-ready documentation, local compliance authority

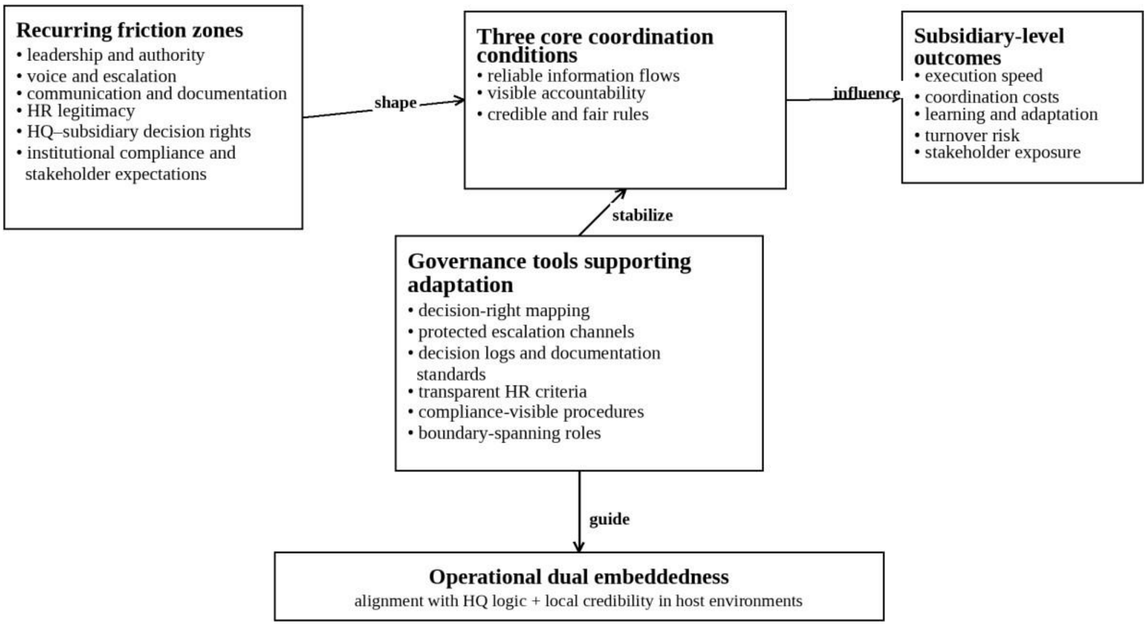
Note: the table summarizes results as operational interfaces: each friction zone is expressed as a mechanism that disrupts information flow or rule credibility, then translated into a repeatable tool that can be institutionalized rather than left to individual interpersonal skill.
Source*:* compiled by the authors based on the literature review.

Table 1 identifies the core zones of friction, while Figure 1 brings them together into one integration logic.

Figure 1 complements Table 1 by presenting the proposed integration logic in a visual form. It shows how recurring friction zones affect three core coordination conditions, how these conditions shape subsidiary-level outcomes, and which governance tools support operational dual embeddedness.

Figure 1

Operational integration model for managing cross-cultural frictions in Chinese MNE subsidiaries



Note: the model shows how recurring friction zones shape the three core coordination conditions inside subsidiaries. Governance tools supporting adaptation stabilize these conditions, while operational dual embeddedness serves as the underlying principle aligning headquarters logic with local credibility in host environments.
Source: elaborated by the authors based on the literature review.

Taken together, Table 1 and Figure 1 show that these frictions should not be read as separate problems. A further result is that these zones rarely operate in isolation; they form a reinforcing system. Contested authority enactment can suppress voice, reducing early warnings and weak-signal reporting, which increases reliance on informal communication and weakens traceability (Hall 1976; Guzman, Fu 2022). Weak traceability then amplifies HR legitimacy disputes because decisions appear discretionary rather than rule-based, raising turnover and reducing the quality of learning loops (Tsui et al. 2006; Rožman et al. 2023). When documentation and grievance handling remain underdeveloped, cultural friction escalates into institutional risk under host-country expectations of transparency and accountability (Scott 2014). This linkage explains why frictions persist as performance constraints rather than "one-off" adaptation issues.

Once this systemic pattern is established, the next result concerns the mechanism through which culture affects performance. Across sources, culture explains performance differences most convincingly when treated as a mechanism shaping information flows and rule credibility, not as a static national label. Methodological research stresses that Hofstede-type indices become useful only when linked to explicit organizational mechanisms and inference boundaries (Minkov, Kaasa 2021;

Minkov 2023). A stable pathway identified in the reviewed studies is that hierarchy-compatible settings increase silence under ambiguity, reduce upward transmission of weak signals, and delay corrective action; participative leadership signals may still fail to trigger voice unless escalation is routinized and socially protected (Guzman, Fu 2022; Park et al. 2024). In practice, decision processes degrade through predictable channels: problem signals are softened, risks are reframed as "not urgent," and disagreement is displaced into private conversations rather than formal decision forums.

Construct validation work further indicates that "power distance" is multi-dimensional; therefore, effective interventions should target concrete micro-mechanisms (fear of contradicting superiors, meeting dynamics, feedback rituals) rather than rely on generic "high/low PDI" labels (Adamovic 2023). This supports the Table 1 logic: integration tools must be designed as routines that reshape interaction patterns (who speaks, how issues are logged, how decisions are justified), not as one-time cultural training.

Project-oriented evidence supports the finding that cultural dimensions influence outcomes primarily through governance routines–coordination cadence, decision processes, and stakeholder alignment–making cross-cultural management a system-design issue rather than an informal "communication topic" (Zhao, Kudiņš 2025). Where governance expectations diverge, performance risk increases not because parties "misunderstand each other," but because they operate with different assumptions about what counts as a valid decision, a legitimate escalation, and adequate documentation for accountability (Scott 2014; Zhao, Kudiņš 2025). Accordingly, the strongest mechanism-level result is the need to convert cultural heterogeneity into explicit governance architecture: decision rights, escalation thresholds, documentation standards, and HR fairness rules that are locally credible while coherent with headquarters logic (Chen, Wang 2019; Scott 2014).

The reviewed literature also provides several short empirical illustrations of how these mechanisms materialize in practice. To show how the mechanisms in Table 1 translate into operational problems, the results are illustrated through short contextual vignettes that mirror common expansion settings.

In infrastructure-heavy internationalisation, projects are delivered through multi-actor governance arrangements where early escalation of quality, safety, and compliance signals is decisive for cost and schedule stability. Sectoral evidence on Chinese overseas footprint suggests that cross-border project delivery increases exposure to low-context documentation requirements and stricter stakeholder scrutiny; therefore, voice suppression and weak traceability become material performance risks (Liew 2025; Scott 2014). Where regulators and clients expect auditable trails, implicit coordination is insufficient: without decision logs, responsibility matrices, and clear escalation thresholds, delays and disputes become more likely. In such settings, protected escalation channels and audit-ready documentation function as integration tools that stabilize coordination by making accountability visible and defensible (Scott 2014; Teece 2018).

In mass-market retail scaling, standardization depends on frontline discipline, credible HR routines, and consistent service scripts across diverse labour markets. Public reporting on Mixue's rapid global growth points to a managerial reality: large outlet networks turn everyday cross-cultural coordination into a continuous operational task in which appraisal credibility and transparent role expectations become necessary for retention and service consistency (Devine 2025; Rožman et al. 2023). If local teams interpret HR decisions as opaque or relationship-driven, scaling weakens through turnover, uneven routine adoption, and inconsistent enforcement of service standards (Tsui et al. 2006; Chen, Wang 2019). Here, HR transparency is not an HR "preference", but an operational stabilizer of standardization.

In contexts of pronounced institutional heterogeneity, subsidiaries face different enforcement styles, stakeholder coalitions, and legitimacy tests. Reporting on China's reorientation toward emerging markets implies that managerial systems must operate across a broader variety of compliance and governance environments, increasing the probability that cultural friction escalates into stakeholder and reputational risk (Chang et al. 2025; Andreoni, Magalhaes 2025). This makes the dual-embeddedness constraint operationally concrete: maintaining HQ coherence while designing locally credible transparency, grievance-handling, and accountability routines that satisfy host expectations without fragmenting corporate control (Scott 2014; Chen, Wang 2019). Where this translation fails, the issue is not "culture mismatch" in general, but the absence of procedures capable of carrying headquarters intent under different legitimacy thresholds.

These examples lead to the final result of the section. Taken together, the results suggest that successful internationalisation of Chinese MNEs depends on what this article calls operational dual embeddedness: alignment with HQ strategic logic combined with credible adaptation to host-country cultural and institutional expectations (Chen, Wang 2019; Scott 2014). In practical terms, this means that adaptation should be built into repeatable routines--decision-right mapping, protected escalation channels, transparent HR rules, documentation standards, compliance-visible procedures, and boundary-spanning roles--rather than left to ad hoc managerial improvisation (Teece 2018).

Discussion

The results show that cross-cultural management in Chinese MNEs should not be treated mainly as a problem of interpersonal misunderstanding. In overseas subsidiaries, the more important issue is how governance works in daily practice. Coordination depends on routines, reporting lines, decision rules, and the credibility of procedures. This view is consistent with research that treats the subsidiary as a multi-level unit operating across several interfaces at once, including HQ systems, local stakeholders, and internal organizational processes (Meyer et al. 2020). In this setting, cultural difference matters not by itself, but through its effect on information reliability, accountability visibility, and the credibility of rules.

The friction zones identified in the Results are also closely connected. They do not operate as isolated problems. When authority is enacted in a way that reduces openness, employees are less likely to raise concerns. When escalation is weak, early signals arrive late. When signals arrive late, documentation becomes reactive rather than timely. This weakens traceability and makes decisions harder to explain or contest. In turn, HR procedures may appear less fair and internal trust may decline. In this sense, culture becomes visible at the operational level because it affects the basic structure that supports clear and workable decisions in subsidiaries (Meyer et al. 2020). The managerial task is therefore not to eliminate differences, but to build routines that translate HQ intent into practices that work locally.

This point is especially important in HQ–subsidiary governance. The issue is not only how much control headquarters should keep. The issue is also whether that control is seen as legitimate in the subsidiary. The Huawei case suggests that HQ control works better when it is supported by narratives and practices that make it understandable and acceptable to local actors, rather than simply imposed from above (Hong, Snell 2021). When such legitimacy is weak, subsidiaries may formally comply with HQ requirements but still hold back local knowledge. Reports may satisfy formal accountability, but they may not support learning. This reduces the informational value of the subsidiary for HQ.

This helps clarify dual embeddedness in practical terms. The question is not whether headquarters should control foreign subsidiaries. The question is how that control is translated into locally credible forms. Where this translation fails, subsidiaries may still comply, but they may slow down feedback, avoid open problem reporting, and weaken reverse learning. This fits broader work showing that political and institutional disruptions shape subsidiary management through interface fragility and micro-level mechanisms (Meyer et al. 2020). In practice, local legitimacy is built through visible procedures: clear delegation, documented decision rationales, grievance handling, and HR rules that can be explained in local terms rather than justified only by HQ authority (Hong, Snell 2021).

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The discussion also suggests that geopolitics changes the meaning of cross-cultural friction. In some host environments, Chinese MNEs face a stronger liability of origin. Under such conditions, national identity becomes relevant for organizational legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and tolerance of ambiguity. Quantitative evidence from Chinese high-tech subsidiaries shows that this liability operates through legitimacy and becomes stronger under greater institutional distance (Zhang 2025). At the same time, political embeddedness at HQ can weaken reverse knowledge transfer and reduce HQ entrepreneurial roles relative to subsidiaries, even without a simple rise in decision centralization (Su et al. 2024). This makes routine governance issues more costly. Practices such as indirect disagreement, relational signaling, or delayed escalation may seem manageable in ordinary settings, but under stronger scrutiny they can quickly become sources of reputational and organizational risk.

Under such pressure, implicit coordination is not enough. Subsidiaries need visible procedures. Auditability, grievance handling, and procedural transparency are no longer optional preferences. They become necessary conditions for stable stakeholder relations (Zhang 2025). In these cases, the absence of visible procedures is unlikely to be interpreted as a neutral cultural difference. It is more likely to be read as a governance weakness.

The findings also support a more specific view of employee voice. Silence is often treated as a leadership problem, and the usual response is leadership training. The literature reviewed here suggests a broader interpretation. Voice depends not only on leader intention, but also on systems, climates, and perceived opportunity structures (Mori et al. 2024). Evidence shows that inclusive leadership can support voice partly by strengthening psychological capital and internal social capital, which lowers the personal risk of speaking up (Yang et al. 2025). For Chinese MNE subsidiaries, this means that reliable upward information flow requires more than supportive rhetoric. It requires formal opportunities and credible protection.

This interpretation becomes stronger when placed alongside evidence on knowledge hiding. Meta-analytic research shows that knowledge hiding has systematic performance effects and is shaped by leadership and HR practices (Shen et al. 2025). This suggests that weak voice routines often exist together with broader distortions in internal information flows unless governance and HR systems actively counter them. In practical terms, escalation channels, non-retaliation safeguards, and structured problem-reporting routines should be treated as part of the organization’s knowledge infrastructure. They reduce the personal cost of delivering bad news, improve the transmission of weak signals, and make earlier corrective action possible (Mori et al. 2024; Yang et al. 2025; Shen et al. 2025). The key issue is not whether one manager is willing to listen, but whether speaking up is expected, protected, and usable in decision processes.

Another important point concerns boundary spanning. Even when HQ and subsidiary goals are formally aligned, coordination may still fail if cross-unit collaboration remains weak. Research suggests that effective boundary spanning depends not only on reporting lines, but also on internal lateral collaboration and multi-node lateral alignment (Santistevan et al. 2022). This helps explain why isolated fixes often do not work well enough. Escalation channels without lateral alignment may send problems upward too late or in poor form. Documentation standards without boundary-spanning roles may create paperwork without shared understanding. HR transparency without cross-unit coordination may reduce perceived unfairness but still leave execution fragile (Santistevan et al. 2022).

This also helps interpret subsidiary autonomy more carefully. Autonomy is not simply the opposite of control. It can be used as a governance tool that supports local credibility when combined with clear decision-right mapping and visible accountability. Evidence linking perceived subsidiary autonomy with local CSR commitment and performance supports this view (Wut et al. 2025). The implication is that flexibility at the interface can improve engagement and outcomes when it is designed intentionally rather than granted informally.

Taken together, the discussion adds three clarifications to the results. First, cross-cultural challenges in Chinese MNE expansion should be understood as an interconnected system rather than as a list of separate differences. Second, that system operates through three linked layers: legitimacy and identity pressures shaped by geopolitics and institutional distance (Zhang 2025; Su et al. 2024), voice and knowledge infrastructures that affect signal quality and learning capacity (Mori et al. 2024; Yang et al. 2025; Shen et al. 2025), and governance translation mechanisms such as boundary spanning and lateral alignment that make integration tools workable across units (Santistevan et al. 2022; Wut et al. 2025). Third, the managerial implication becomes clearer at this point: adaptation is not mainly a change in attitude. It is a redesign of routines and interfaces so that decisions remain explainable, contestable, and workable under legitimacy pressure (Meyer et al. 2020; Hong, Snell 2021).

At the same time, the limits of the study remain important. This article is based on structured synthesis, not on meta-analysis, and it does not estimate causal effect sizes. Sectoral coverage may also remain uneven. Future research would benefit from systematic comparison across infrastructure projects, consumer franchises, and high-tech subsidiaries under different levels of institutional distance, with attention to how governance interfaces are designed and how they change over time (Zhang 2025). It would also be useful to examine more directly how liability of origin interacts with internal voice systems and knowledge-hiding mechanisms, rather than treating legitimacy only as an external pressure (Zhang 2025; Shen et al. 2025).

Conclusion

Chinese multinational enterprises are expanding through more embedded forms of international activity. Their global presence now depends not only on exports or market entry, but also on local production, acquisitions, franchising, long-term projects, and large retail networks. Under these conditions, cross-cultural management becomes part of daily operations. Subsidiaries must coordinate work, pass risk signals upward, justify decisions, and remain credible under host-country expectations that do not always match headquarters routines.

The study shows that cross-cultural problems are not random. They concentrate around a limited set of recurring interfaces where coordination is either supported or weakened. Six friction zones appear most consistently: leadership and authority, employee voice and escalation, communication and documentation, HR legitimacy, HQ–subsidiary governance, and institutional compliance. These are not abstract cultural differences. They are practical points where information becomes less reliable, accountability becomes less visible, and rules become less credible. When this happens, firms face delays, higher coordination costs, weaker learning, and greater stakeholder exposure.

The main conclusion is that successful internationalisation of Chinese MNEs depends on operational dual embeddedness. Subsidiaries must stay aligned with headquarters while also being credible in the local environment. This credibility does not come from informal flexibility alone. It depends on routines that make coordination more stable: clear decision rights, protected escalation channels, traceable documentation, transparent HR rules, visible compliance procedures, and boundary-spanning roles that help translate HQ intent into workable local practice.

The article also makes two main contributions. The first is theoretical. It shows that cross-cultural management should be understood not simply as a problem of differences, but as a problem of interface design shaped by information flow, accountability, and rule credibility. The second is managerial. It links recurring friction zones to practical governance tools that can help reduce coordination loss, protect legitimacy, and support performance in foreign subsidiaries.

At the same time, the study remains a structured synthesis of published evidence. It does not provide causal estimation or original field data. For that reason, the proposed model should be read as an analytically grounded framework that now needs further testing through comparative case studies and subsidiary-level research.

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