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REVIEW

Autoethnography as a Research Method in Cross-Cultural Education Studies

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ABSTRACT

This review article examines the application of autoethnography as a research method and pedagogical tool within cross-cultural education studies. It argues that autoethnography's unique epistemological grounding in personal experience, systematic reflexivity, and relational ethics provides a powerful means to investigate the complex and often unspoken affective dimensions of teaching and learning in cross-cultural education. The review synthesizes a diverse body of literature to demonstrate how autoethnography effectively bridges theoretical frameworks with lived educational practice. It traces the method's intellectual genealogy and evolution, outlining its major typologies, including analytic, evocative, critical, and collaborative autoethnography, and their relevance for educational research. The analysis highlights autoethnography's distinctive capacity to foster critical cultural awareness, challenge embedded power imbalances, and cultivate genuine empathy among educators and students, with specific illustrations from teacher education, foreign-language learning, and the communication of Chinese educational wisdom. However, the article also critically engages with significant challenges, including ongoing debates about methodological rigor, ethical complexities in representing self and others, and practical implementation barriers in diverse educational settings. The conclusion affirms that when practiced with analytical discipline and ethical responsibility, autoethnography offers a unique pathway for generating situated and transformative knowledge in cross-cultural education. By creating meaningful connections between personal narrative and broader cultural-

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structural analysis, it ultimately contributes to more nuanced understandings of cross-cultural educational encounters and their implications for educational theory and practice.

Keywords: Autoethnography; Cross-Cultural Education; Reflexivity; Qualitative Research Methods

1. Introduction

This introductory section outlines the background of the review by linking two key strands: the rise of autoethnography as a qualitative method that foregrounds lived experience, reflexivity, and relational knowledge, and recent developments in cross-cultural education that emphasize empathy, ethical responsibility, and global cultural awareness, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era. By highlighting how both fields treat experience and culture as mutually constitutive, the section shows why autoethnography offers methodological and pedagogical tools for examining educational encounters across cultural boundaries. Teacher education is positioned as a prominent site where this convergence becomes visible, demonstrating how narrative and reflective inquiry can illuminate cultural assumptions, power relations, and inclusive classroom practices.

1.1. Autoethnography and the Reorientation of Qualitative Inquiry

The ascent of autoethnography as a research method reflects a broader epistemic reorientation within the humanities and social sciences. Over the past three decades, autoethnography has gradually moved from the methodological periphery to an established position within qualitative inquiry[1]. This transformation has occurred as scholars increasingly regard personal narratives not as merely anecdotal expressions, but as analytically valuable forms of cultural data amenable to systematic examination[1]. In this review, autoethnography is understood as a qualitative approach in which researchers analyze their own lived experiences in order to illuminate and interrogate broader cultural meanings, institutional dynamics, and educational practices.

Emerging from the postmodern turn in anthropology and sociology, autoethnography interrogates positivist assumptions about objectivity and value neutrality. Autoethnography rejects the unrealistic expectation that researchers can achieve full emotional or cultural detachment from their subjects[2]. Grounded in a researcher's subjectivity, affective engagement, and positional transparency, autoethnography reframes knowledge production as culturally embedded and relational: in this paradigm, knowledge is not passively discovered but rather co-created through interpretive acts between the researcher and the social world[2].

Within autoethnographic practices, the intertwining of narrative and reflexive analysis thus acknowledges the constructed nature of experience and illuminates how individual trajectories intersect with social structures and cultural meanings. The model of analytic autoethnography codifies this rigor through five features: complete membership, continuous analytic reflexivity, textual visibility of the researcher, dialogic engagement, and a commitment to theoretical explanation[1]. In this way, it preserves scholarly credibility alongside narrative vitality. Extending these commitments, knowledge claims implicate the knower, necessitating explicit reflection on how a researcher's background, social position, and epistemological commitments inform their interpretations[2].

These positions suggest that autoethnography extends, rather than abandons, ethnographic traditions by sustaining a theory-informed and systematic representation of lived experience[1, 2]. By situating knowledge production within interpretive and affective dimensions, autoethnography becomes especially relevant for addressing complex educational challenges in culturally diverse contexts.

1.2. New Developments in Cross-Cultural Education Studies

As an interdisciplinary field, cross-cultural studies has its roots in mid- to late-twentieth-century work in anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and comparative education, where researchers explored how cultural difference shapes cognition, communication, and social interaction. In this review, cross-cultural communication is understood as the process through which individuals negotiate meaning, manage cultural differences, and construct shared understanding

across sociocultural boundaries through interaction. Early cross-cultural research often emphasized the comparison and measurement of cultural differences, such as contrasting value systems, communicative norms, and patterns of adaptation across contexts; but over time, scholars increasingly turned toward more critical perspectives that foreground issues of power, representation, and global inequality [3, 4]. Within this evolving intellectual landscape, concerns about how people learn, teach, and interact across cultural boundaries gradually consolidated into a more focused area of inquiry around cross-cultural education.

Building on this disciplinary consolidation, cross-cultural education has expanded from language proficiency toward ethical and civic formation in an era of intensified globalization. Research in cross-cultural education now emphasizes cultural awareness, cross-cultural understanding, and the cultivation of global citizenship in addition to linguistic competence [3, 4]. This expanded scope reframes language instruction not merely as the transmission of technical skills but as a pedagogical practice that cultivates ethical responsibility and facilitates meaningful intercultural communication.

In the context of educational transformations following COVID-19, cross-cultural education has also undergone a pedagogical reorientation that foregrounds empathy as a central instructional aim. For instance, history education has begun to place greater emphasis on empathy as a central pedagogical aim [3]. By encouraging learners to move beyond self-centered viewpoints toward intersubjective engagement with others' perspectives, it reconceptualizes schooling as a process of emotional growth and moral formation [3].

Extending this reorientation, recent scholarship has called for a deeper theoretical reconceptualization of cross-cultural learning that moves beyond conventional nation-state boundaries. The nation-state framework imposes epistemic limits; education should instead be conceived through the lens of a community with a shared future for humankind [4]. This reconceptualization redefines cross-cultural learning not only as interaction across boundaries but as the ethical transcendence of those boundaries, thus aligning educational objectives with global ethics and collective human responsibility. Such reconceptualization opens up theoretical and methodological space for approaches that integrate cultural analysis with lived and affective experience.

1.3. Autoethnography and Cross-Cultural Education Studies

Autoethnography and cross-cultural education converge around a shared theory of experience, and this conceptual resonance provides a foundation for examining how education unfolds across cultural boundaries. Epistemologically and practically, both domains treat experience and culture as mutually constitutive and recognize the affective and ethical dimensions of education as legitimate sources of insight. Autoethnography integrates educational method, cultural interpretation, and autobiographical narrative; its core purpose is to cultivate cultural awareness of self and others [5]. Methodologically, the construction of autobiographical field texts and the analysis of experiential patterns serve to identify and explicate the underlying cultural frameworks that shape individual experiences within the educational sphere.

Within this shared framework, autoethnographic practice highlights the interpretive processes through which the educational experience of individuals becomes culturally meaningful. In transforming private stories into publicly discussable social interpretations, autoethnography acts as a conduit between personal memory and collective meaning, thereby demonstrating how individual narratives regarding education can serve as sites of broader social, cultural, and educational significance [5]. Crucially, this translational move requires researchers to explain how their narratives illustrate or contribute to wider social or educational concerns, rather than assuming that such relevance will be self-evident to readers. This shared investment in reflective, ethically attuned interpretation positions autoethnography as a natural partner for cross-cultural pedagogy.

As a reflective and relational methodology, autoethnography reshapes cross-cultural educational practice by enabling teachers to critically examine their pedagogical habits, cultural assumptions, and power relations in ways that foster empathy and inclusive classroom spaces. In cross-cultural educational practice, including teacher education and foreign-language instruction, autoethnography reorients professional learning from a primarily technical enterprise to one grounded in relational understanding [6]. Through structured narrative writing and peer dialogue, teachers can analyze their own classroom practices, identify and challenge implicit cultural norms, and cultivate empathy for students from diverse backgrounds. This reflective process not only il-

luminates unequal power relations and unconscious cultural biases but also creates inclusive discursive spaces where marginalized voices can be acknowledged and valued [6].

Within language education, autoethnographic and narrative practices function as integrative tools that link linguistic learning with cultural interpretation, thereby fostering deeper intercultural awareness and critical reflection. In English language education, narrative tasks, cross-cultural comparisons, and reflective journals enable linguistic practice and cultural meaning-making to proceed in tandem [7]. For instance, when learners compare their own cultural norms with those encountered in other contexts, reflective writing allows them to understand how language conveys values, thus promoting a more nuanced and critically informed intercultural awareness [7]. In short, autoethnography functions as both a lens for critical cultural analysis and a lever for transformative educational practice in cross-cultural education.

1.4. Aims and Structure of This Review Article

Autoethnography provides a methodological pathway for linking cross-cultural understanding with educational practice. Rather than treating culture as background knowledge or fixed content, autoethnographic approaches foreground lived experience, relational meaning-making, and reflexive interpretation as core components of cross-cultural education. Building on this premise, this article pursues three interconnected aims. First, it clarifies the epistemological assumptions and ethical commitments that underpin autoethnographic inquiry. Second, it synthesizes how autoethnography functions simultaneously as a research strategy and a pedagogical method across key arenas of cross-cultural education, especially teacher education and foreign-language learning. Third, it evaluates the methodological tensions and practical challenges involved in applying autoethnography in educational settings, and outlines the directions in which future pedagogical and research innovations may develop.

Rather than providing an exhaustive catalogue of all autoethnographic applications, the article adopts a focused scope shaped by the needs of cross-cultural education. It highlights the domains in which autoethnography most clearly demonstrates its potential to bridge theoretical frameworks, methodological designs, and classroom-level practice. This orientation allows the review to contribute in three ways: it consolidates debates about the methodological foundations of autoethnography; it articulates an integrative framework that links reflexive inquiry with curricular and pedagogical design; and it demonstrates how autoethnography supports cross-cultural communication and learning in concrete educational contexts.

The structure of the article follows the logic of these aims. Section 2 introduces the epistemic orientation and ethical principles, such as relationality, vulnerability, and reflexivity, that define autoethnographic practice. Section 3 examines how these foundations translate into pedagogical and research practices in cross-cultural education, drawing on examples from teacher education, foreign-language learning, and curriculum design. Section 4 assesses the methodological challenges associated with autoethnography, including issues of validity, representation, and relational ethics, and considers the implications for future research and educational innovation.

2. Autoethnography as a Research Paradigm

2.1. Origins and Intellectual Genealogies

Autoethnography emerged at the intersection of autobiography and ethnography as a response to the crisis of representation in the social sciences in the late twentieth century. Autoethnography is commonly defined as a qualitative approach in which researchers use their own experiences (auto) as a lens through which to interpret and represent cultural meanings and practices (ethno) by means of systematic, reflexive narrative (graphy) [5, 8, 9]. Over roughly three decades, autoethnography has evolved from an experimental, marginal practice into a recognized family of methods that encompasses diverse forms of narrative, performance, and collaborative inquiry within qualitative research [1, 6, 10].

Autoethnography rests on a plural intellectual genealogy that legitimizes personal experience as knowledge and as critique. Drawing on postmodernism, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, feminism, critical race theory, and queer theory, it challenges positivist ideals of objectivity and neutrality by recognizing the researcher's experience as a valid epistemic resource [6, 7]. Phenomenology grounds inquiry in the lived world, emphasizing that human understanding originates from the intentionality of individual experience; symbolic interactionism underscores the co-production of

meaning between self and society; feminism's claim that 'the personal is political' authorizes the public articulation of private experience; critical race theory deploys counter-storytelling to reveal structural oppression; and queer theory interrogates essentialist constructions of gender and sexuality[6–8].

Integrated within autoethnography, these perspectives collectively equip the method with the critical capacity to uncover systemic inequalities and to amplify the voices of marginalized populations. In doing so, autoethnographic research is positioned as both an ethical act and a form of engaged social scholarship[8]. This theoretical multiplicity does not yield a single and unified framework but rather supports a flexible and evolving methodological formation.

2.2. Conceptual Framework and Typologies

Conceptually, autoethnography is understood as a theory–method–text formation that centers the dynamic interplay of self and culture. Autoethnography is an integrated approach; its central task is to illuminate how individual and collective experiences intersect with identity politics and social justice[9]. Within this framework, narrative is not treated as a passive reflection of objective reality but as an active and performative act through which meaning is constructed and communicated. In this view, texts do not merely represent the world; they actively participate in shaping it. Understanding narrative as a form of action helps explain why autoethnography accommodates a wide range of representational styles and research purposes, thereby allowing scholars to develop typologies that reflect this diversity.

Within this methodological family, analytic and evocative autoethnography mark two influential yet overlapping orientations. Analytic autoethnography is characterized by complete-member research status, analytic reflexivity, textual visibility of the researcher, dialogic engagement with others, and a commitment to theoretical explanation[1]. Rooted in symbolic interactionism and realist traditions, this approach seeks to uncover underlying social mechanisms by analyzing personal experience as a site of empirical inquiry, thereby generating explanatory theory through sustained self-reflection. In contrast, evocative autoethnography emphasizes emotional resonance and literary craftsmanship, intentionally rejecting impersonal, abstracted academic prose to engage readers on a deeply affective level[11].

Beyond this well-known distinction, scholars have also developed critical forms of autoethnography that explicitly foreground issues of power, inequality, and social justice, as well as collaborative autoethnography that brings multiple researchers into dialogue around shared and contrasting experiences. For example, Anderson's articulation of analytic autoethnography[1] and Ngunjiri et al.'s work on collaborative autoethnography[12] have become widely cited exemplars that illustrate how different types of autoethnography organize the relationship between narrative, theory, and social change.

Rather than viewing these orientations as mutually exclusive, scholars increasingly treat them as endpoints on a continuum, allowing for strategic combinations of theoretical rigor and emotional evocation depending on the project's aims and textual purpose[13, 14]. However, the existence of this continuum continues to provoke ongoing debates about what constitutes methodological rigor in autoethnographic research.

2.3. Rigor, Evaluation, and Methodological Practices

Debates over rigor require evaluation criteria that are commensurate with the epistemology of autoethnography as a research method. Responding to critiques of self-indulgence and limited generalizability, scholars have reframed the concept of rigor to align with the interpretive nature of autoethnographic inquiry, shifting the emphasis away from conventional standards such as reliability and validity toward alternative criteria, including avowed subjectivity, reflexivity, emotional credibility, and contribution to knowledge[15]. Researchers employ multiple, context-sensitive forms of evaluation that correspond to the specific research goals, textual genres, and disciplinary frameworks in which the work is situated[16].

Critics of autoethnography have raised several concerns about its methodological legitimacy, including accusations of excessive subjectivity, emotional bias, and a lack of generalizability beyond the researcher's individual experience[6]. These critiques question whether autoethnography can meet the traditional standards of objectivity and empirical rigor that are often expected of qualitative research. In response, proponents of autoethnography have developed several strategies to address these concerns and to demon-

strate the method's academic credibility.

One key response is the rigorous application of self-reflexivity, where researchers critically engage with their own positionality, emotional involvement, and narrative choices throughout the research process. Additionally, Fautoethnographers often employ triangulation, using multiple data sources such as personal reflection, interviews, field notes, and artifacts, to enhance the validity of their findings. By making their methodological choices transparent, researchers can also ensure that readers understand how their personal narratives contribute to broader social and cultural analyses. These practices help mitigate the critiques of subjectivity and emotional bias, while still maintaining the deeply personal and reflexive nature of the method[17, 18].

In practice, researchers enact transparency and trustworthiness through a suite of concrete strategies. Common tactics include triangulation across self-observation, reflective journals, artifacts, and interviews; peer debriefing; explicit methodological disclosure; and disciplined self-reflexivity[17]. Building on prior practices, an operational framework for design, data collection, analysis, ethics, and writing provides novice researchers with a structured, repeatable model for autoethnographic inquiry[17].

Autoethnographic inquiry aligns with established empirical research standards through a multi-dimensional rubric that integrates problem construction, methodological justification, critical analysis, and ethical interpretation[18]. Without theoretical grounding or empirical contribution, autoethnographic work risks being dismissed as narcissistic or overly personal selfie writing[19]. Therefore, ensuring methodological transparency is not an end in itself, but a means to achieving theoretical insight, empirical clarity, or socially meaningful critique. These practices of quality assurance intersect directly with ethical concerns, as writing about the self inevitably involves the representation of others and the management of relational boundaries.

2.4. Ethics, Relational Responsibility, and Institutional Governance

Ethically, autoethnography negotiates the tension between narrative authority and relational responsibility. Because an individual's narrative often includes fragments of others' lives, slippage between memory and narration can misrepresent or harm participants, a dynamic sometimes described as sliding ethics[20]. Consequently, researchers are expected to exercise anticipatory accountability, composing their narratives with the ethical awareness that all those referenced could, in principle, become readers of the text.

Extending this stance, a relational ethics approach grounded in respect and connectedness recommends processual consent, pseudonymization, and composite characters to safeguard privacy[14]. Researchers should also weigh their own vulnerability. Disclosing trauma or sensitive material can entail emotional depletion and social risk; careful field documentation, staged disclosure at publication, and, when appropriate, fictionalization or de-identification can mitigate harm[14]. These relational demands often outpace inherited institutional procedures.

Institutional review processes frequently lag behind the relational realities of autoethnography, inviting collaborative and principled solutions. Institutional Review Board protocols, shaped by positivist assumptions, are often ill-suited to narrative and co-constructed forms of inquiry[21]. Collaborative Autoethnography addresses this limitation by distributing ethical responsibility through shared data practices and team-based trust. It further articulates operational ethical principles, such as nonmaleficence, processual (ongoing) consent, member checking, and the avoidance of harmful publication, that translate relational ethics into tangible research practices[21].

At a broader level, three responsibilities are central: cognitive (understanding the logics of diverse paradigms), normative (calibrating evaluation to epistemic positioning), and advocacy (publicly defending the method's legitimacy)[22]. This highlights the importance of writing as if everyone mentioned is listening, thereby maintaining a delicate balance between personal expression and ethical responsibility toward others[10]. Collectively, these strategies aim to bring institutional regulation into alignment with the lived ethical complexities of narrative research.

Taken together, autoethnography's theoretical plurality, narrative praxis, and ethical reflexivity make it a vital pathway for linking personal experience to cultural structure. Building on this methodological and ethical foundation, the next section turns to cross-cultural education as a field of practice, examining how autoethnography has been operationalized in classroom, professional, and policy contexts, including selected China-focused cases. Its core value

lies not in reproducing experience but in generating situated knowledge and reconstructing meaning through writing: continually balancing critique with care and inquiry with responsibility. Framed in this way, autoethnography advances both methodological innovation and ethically accountable scholarship across contemporary social and educational research.

3. Autoethnography as a Research Method in Cross-Cultural Education Studies

Building on the methodological foundations outlined in the previous section, this section examines how autoethnography has been used as a research method in cross-cultural education studies. We draw on a set of representative autoethnographic studies to illustrate how researchers have framed their questions, situated their work in particular cross-cultural contexts, and used autoethnography as a research tool to generate emergent findings.

3.1. Autoethnography as Critical and Decolonial Methodology

As a qualitative methodology integrating self-narrative with cultural analysis, autoethnography generates a mode of situated and reflexive knowledge grounded in lived experience. By occupying the dual position of experiencer and interpreter, the researcher gains access to the emotional and embodied dimensions of social life that remain largely inaccessible through conventional methods such as surveys, interviews, or structured observation [23].

Recent autoethnographic and narrative studies in cross-cultural communication illustrate how researchers employ lived experience to analyze both translational and pedagogical practices. Work on the translation of LGBTQ+ rainbow texts in China, for example, examines how translators and university teachers negotiate dual and multiple identities while mediating between global queer discourses and local sociocultural norms for different audiences, foregrounding the practical negotiations involved in framing, institutional constraints, and the politics of visibility [24–26]. Similarly, Hamdan's autoethnography as a Saudi woman academic migrating to Canada analyzes how gendered educational structures, family expectations, and transnational movement reshape her professional positioning, self-understanding, and feminist orientation through a first-person narrative grounded in her schooling and migration experiences [27]. Together, these cases exemplify autoethnography's explanatory and critical potential to deconstruct cultural prejudice and illuminate the multifaceted nature of identity formation.

As a decolonial methodology, autoethnography examines and challenges power asymmetries between the Global North and Global South. Analytic autoethnography applied to a Canadian inter-university project demonstrates how control over research funding, dominant methodological frameworks, and Western time structures can reproduce colonial hierarchies, revealing contradictions between declared decolonial aims and neocolonial practices [28]. Collaborative autoethnography examining interdisciplinary STEAM partnerships between art and engineering educators reveals biases rooted in disciplinary hierarchies, rhetorical clashes, and contested narrative authority [29]. Through iterative cycles of writing and reflective dialogue, these points of tension become opportunities for deeper intercultural insight and for legitimizing new methodological practices. In this way, autoethnography is not merely a narrative technique but also a critical tool for analyzing how knowledge is produced, legitimized, and contested across cultural and institutional boundaries.

3.2. Voice, Empowerment, and Collaborative Autoethnography in Educational Practices

For marginalized communities, autoethnography serves as a powerful medium for amplifying voice, cultivating empathy, and fostering empowerment, particularly when implemented through collaborative practices. Autoethnographic narratives connect the emotional and cultural dimensions of lived experience, helping fill gaps in social-work research on microaggressions and family trauma. For instance, Witkin uses autoethnography to examine her own professional and family experiences as a social worker, asking how microaggressions, intergenerational trauma, and institutional constraints shape practice and self-understanding [30]. By interweaving personal narrative with theoretical reflection, the study demonstrates how autoethnography can surface forms of everyday violence and emotional labor that are often overlooked in evidence-based paradigms. However, persistent

systemic barriers are also identified, including the dominance of evidence-based paradigms, challenges in gaining scholarly legitimacy, and heightened ethical risks, while still affirming the method's unique potential to uncover hidden forms of oppression, support empathic engagement, and improve cultural sensitivity.

Shifting to the collective level, collaborative autoethnography offers sequential and concurrent models that weave together multiple personal narratives to enhance reflexivity and reduce individual bias [12]. Hughes and Noblit conduct a six-phase meta-ethnography of autoethnographic accounts of teaching race-related courses, asking how teacher-scholars narrate their experiences of navigating white cultural dominance, student resistance, and institutional barriers [31]. Collectively, these collaborative and synthetic approaches demonstrate how autoethnography can evolve from a mode of personal storytelling into a tool for analyzing and critiquing broader social structures.

In teacher education, autoethnography shifts the focus of professional preparation from technical skill acquisition to relationally grounded and ethically responsive pedagogical practice. A dynamic curriculum structured around the five core elements of communication, communicator, medium, message, audience, and effect, guides teachers to develop their own cross-cultural competence while fostering the same capacity in their students [32]. Autoethnography helps novice teachers understand the emotional, interpersonal, and cultural dynamics that shape classrooms, fostering critical reflection and humanistic care [6]. This pedagogical shift reframes teaching from an instrumental act of content delivery to an ethically engaged process of human-centered interaction and mutual understanding.

In foreign-language education, autoethnography integrates linguistic skill development with cultural cognition, thereby transforming classrooms into spaces where students engage in active meaning-making and intercultural exploration. Language learning is fundamentally cultural in nature, and instructors advocate for strategies such as cross-cultural annotation, task-based learning, and reflective writing to meaningfully link linguistic knowledge with cultural understanding [7]. In university-level cross-cultural English and integrated English courses, for example, students are often encouraged to produce autoethnographic narratives through structured 'Cultural Stories' exercises that foreground cultural self-awareness and reflective discussion [33], that compare their own educational and family backgrounds with the cultural representations encountered in course texts, or to document how they negotiate disciplinary discourse and global professional expectations in English-for-specific-purposes settings such as forestry programs [34].Such assignments invite learners to treat their lived experiences as data for reflection, thereby situating language practice within broader processes of identity formation and intercultural negotiation.

On the teacher side, studies of cross-cultural English teaching incorporate autoethnographic journaling and classroom vignettes to examine how instructors develop cross-cultural competence, reframe their pedagogical beliefs, and adapt their classroom practices in response to diverse student cohorts [7]. Although these projects do not always explicitly label themselves as autoethnography, they embody core features of autoethnographic work, systematic self-reflection, narrative representation of lived experience, and explicit linkage to wider cultural and educational concerns, and illustrate how autoethnographic approaches can be embedded into language education.

Within internationalized higher education, a comprehensive three-part pedagogical framework emphasizes strengthening teachers' cross-cultural instructional capacity, cultivating student inclusiveness and reflexivity, and integrating immersive, project-based learning (e.g., virtual reality) to sustain a cyclical process of experience, reflection, and recontextualization [33]. A complementary permeative education approach holds that cultural integration emerges organically through interpersonal interaction and context-rich case analysis, rather than through top-down, didactic instruction [33, 35]. Across these models, autoethnography facilitates a shift from passive knowledge transmission to collaborative cultural co-creation and the ethical development of global awareness.

For cross-cultural educators themselves, autoethnography offers a structured and reflective pathway for both professional development and scholarly collaboration. Learning autoethnographic methods enables educators to convert personal uncertainty into theoretical insight, shifting from introspective reflection to cultural interpretation through measured openness that values postmodern creativity while sustaining academic rigor [8]. Collaborative autoethnography builds upon this foundation by allowing diverse participants

to co-author, engage in dialogue, and reflect collectively, thereby generating deeper, multi-voiced insights and facilitating a transition from personal narrative to shared scholarly action. A concurrent collaborative autoethnography model follows a collaborative process: establish shared goals, write narratives independently (divergence), engage in group reflection, collect supplementary data, and conduct joint coding and writing [12, 21]. This iterative cycle balances individual self-exploration with collaborative interpretation, allowing personal reflection to evolve into culturally informed understanding and actionable social transformation.

3.3. Policy, Programs, and the Communication of Chinese Educational Wisdom

Before examining Chinese educational wisdom as a specific domain of cross-cultural communication, it is important to clarify why this example is relevant within the broader landscape of cross-cultural education. Cross-cultural education increasingly requires educators and researchers to navigate not only interpersonal and classroom-level cultural differences but also the transmission of educational philosophies, values, and policy frameworks across national and civilizational boundaries [32]. Chinese educational wisdom has become a salient case in this regard because it is frequently mobilized in international dialogues, policy initiatives, and educational collaborations, making it a concrete site where cross-cultural interpretation, adaptation, and negotiation can be observed.

Moving from classroom and professional practice to policy and programmatic levels, this review highlights the cross-cultural communication of Chinese educational wisdom as one illustrative context in which autoethnography may play a role. Autoethnography functions as both a narrative and methodological scaffold for translating and communicating Chinese educational wisdom across cultural contexts.

Within the broader strategic frameworks of the 'Community of Shared Future for Mankind' (a Chinese foreign-policy vision that emphasizes global cooperation, shared responsibility, and mutually beneficial development) and the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (a transnational infrastructure and cultural exchange initiative proposed by China, aiming at enhancing connectivity across Asia, Europe, and beyond), this educational wisdom emphasizes the internationalization of higher education and the promotion of cross-cultural exchange through collaboration education [36]. It encompasses cultural traditions (e.g., self-cultivation, the unity of knowledge and action), educational philosophies (e.g., universal access to education, teaching according to individual aptitude), national curricular systems, and pedagogical practices (e.g., balancing memorization with understanding, dialectical thinking) [36]. Cross-cultural communities of practice connect educators and policymakers through shared commitments, common goals, and collaborative resource-sharing [36]. Using the classroom as a boundary-crossing space, they propose a four-stage transmission mechanism: cognition, comprehension, adaptation, and practice, where model instruction and conceptual explanation enable globalized education practices and localized cultural integration.

For international readers, the analytic interest of this example lies less in the specific terminology of Chinese national initiatives and more in the broader pattern it illustrates: how state-level discourses about educational values and global cooperation shape cross-cultural curricula, teacher development, and student experience. Similar dynamics can be observed in other regions where national or regional frameworks (for example, European higher education convergence or global citizenship education agendas) intersect with cross-cultural teaching and learning.

In this context, autoethnography does not aim to offer a comprehensive account of Chinese educational philosophy; instead, it serves to document, interpret, and critically analyze how educators and students experience and negotiate these policy frameworks and core principles in particular institutional and classroom settings. Such first-hand accounts can illuminate how abstract ideas about educational wisdom are enacted, adapted, and sometimes contested in everyday cross-cultural educational practice, thereby generating insights that are transferable to other policy environments. Autoethnography, in this context, serves to document, interpret, and critically analyze these processes of negotiation and educational transformation, offering first-hand accounts of how core principles are reinterpreted and applied in new cultural settings.

Within these China-focused programmatic contexts, the internationalization of higher education in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) exemplifies the cross-cultural potential of autoethnography in a domain of sector-specific urgency

and global expansion. TCM is currently taught in more than 500 institutions worldwide, spanning five continents and including over 300 universities within China [37]. Despite this extensive global presence, the field faces enduring challenges. These include cultural dissonance, faculty shortages, curricular imbalance, insufficient accreditation mechanisms, and uneven allocation of educational resources [37]. In this context, emphasizing cultural identity becomes essential to meaningful internationalization.

At present, explicitly self-identified autoethnographic studies in TCM at higher educational levels remain scarce. Existing research in this area relies mainly on policy analysis, survey-based evaluation, curriculum studies, media representation, and teaching modes rather than on reflexive and first-person inquiry [38–40]. Reflective essays by TCM educators resemble autoethnographic writing but rarely adopt autoethnography as a formal research design. Several factors may contribute to this absence. Biomedical paradigms often privilege technical rationality over experiential knowledge; professional authority and institutional sensitivity may discourage reflexive first-person work; a lack of methodological training in narrative-based inquiry within TCM programs further limits its development [37]. Similar patterns have been reported in nursing and medical education, where autoethnography remains valuable yet marginal and dependent on dedicated methodological support [39].

Nonetheless, autoethnography offers considerable potential for future research. Possible topics include international students' negotiation of TCM epistemology, instructors' reflections on mediating between TCM and biomedical frameworks in bilingual classrooms, clinician-educators' experiences of cultural misunderstanding in clinical internships, and students' identity work in cross-cultural professional formation. Such studies in TCM could similarly deepen global understanding of TCM education by foregrounding the lived, affective, and intercultural dimensions of teaching and learning.

Autoethnographic approaches developed in TCM contexts may therefore inform, and in turn be informed by, parallel initiatives in other national and sectoral settings. This relative scarcity of formal autoethnographic work underscores a promising direction for future research, in which teachers, students, and clinical supervisors systematically treat their own cross-cultural experiences as data for understanding how TCM is taught, learned, and reinterpreted in diverse global contexts.

Within the broader context of foreign-language education, autoethnography can be operationalized as guided intercultural pedagogy (e.g., 'Cultural Stories' exercises) to promote cultural self-awareness and reflective engagement with culture and identity [33]. The process of writing and engaging in autoethnographic inquiry can help initiate shifts away from students' originally essentialized understandings of culture and identity, thereby transforming students from passive knowledge recipients into active meaning-makers and dialogic collaborators [34]. Data from a university-level Cross-Cultural English Integrated Course demonstrate how culturally varied materials, ranging from domestic and target-language culture to international contexts and cross-cultural themes, can serve as narrative prompts for reflective writing and comparative cultural interpretation in ways consistent with autoethnographic learning [41].

In sum, the contributions of autoethnography as a research method to cross-cultural education studies operate across multiple levels and are mutually reinforcing. At the research level, it reveals the colonial structures embedded in knowledge production and power relations; at the educational level, it promotes cultural self-reflection and the cultivation of ethical empathy; and at the practical level, it offers a narrative-based methodology for communicating Chinese educational thought and other non-Western epistemologies across diverse cultural contexts.

4. Autoethnography: Challenges and Reflections

4.1. Methodological Legitimacy in Audit Cultures

Although autoethnography holds considerable theoretical promise and practical relevance for cross-cultural education, it continues to encounter four persistent challenges: methodological legitimacy, ethical practice, cultural representation, and pedagogical implementation. Addressing these challenges requires sustained critical reflection and innovative approaches to ensure the method's rigor, ethical integrity, and educational effectiveness.

Debates over methodological legitimacy remain a significant structural barrier. Within the context of audit culture

and New Public Management, evaluation systems tend to privilege quantitative, positivist methodologies as the primary indicators of academic rigor. Frameworks such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework and Australia's Excellence in Research for Australia emphasize measurable outputs and citation metrics, thereby marginalizing narrative and qualitative research, including autoethnography [16]. Sparkes highlights how these institutional pressures can result in the downgrading or outright exclusion of autoethnographic work, particularly among early-career researchers, contributing to a wider cycle of symbolic exclusion. Autoethnography's scholarly value lies not in emotional catharsis or personal storytelling, but in its capacity to generate theoretical insight and reveal structural dynamics within cultural and educational systems [19]. The implication is clear: autoethnographic self-narration must be grounded in conceptual reasoning and directed toward broader analytical frameworks.

At the methodological and institutional levels, one response to this challenge is to develop fit-for-purpose frameworks for rigor that align with autoethnography's interpretive epistemology. Building on Le Roux's criteria for rigor in autoethnography and Hughes et al.'s rubric for translating autoethnographic work across educational research standards [15, 18], researchers can articulate expectations around problem construction, methodological transparency, analytic depth, and contribution to knowledge in ways that are legible to evaluation committees while remaining faithful to narrative inquiry. In practice, this involves combining the strategies discussed earlier, such as disciplined self-reflexivity, triangulation, and explicit positionality statements, with advocacy work in departments, editorial boards, and review panels to broaden notions of what counts as empirical and rigorous research.

4.2. Ethical Complexity in Cross-Cultural Educational Contexts

Ethical complexity becomes significantly more pronounced in cross-cultural contexts. Although autoethnography focuses on self-narration, it inevitably raises concerns related to privacy, consent, and interpretation within culturally diverse and relationally complex networks. In collectivist societies, personal narratives are often interpreted as representations of group identity, meaning that the disclosure of sensitive family or community experiences can have social and political consequences beyond academic settings [20].

Additionally, non-Western researchers who write critically about their own cultural or institutional systems may face heightened political risks and public scrutiny, increasing the potential for ethical slippage or unintended harm. The Institutional Review Board protocols, typically grounded in Western notions of individual autonomy, often fail to accommodate collective forms of privacy and culturally embedded ethical expectations, especially in international and intercultural research [21]. To address these challenges, a relational ethics approach centered on trust, reciprocity, and mutual respect calls for context-sensitive consent and ongoing negotiation of emotional vulnerability and power dynamics [14].

To address these ethical complexities, scholars have proposed culturally responsive relational ethics frameworks that move beyond one-off informed consent and standardized IRB procedures [14, 21]. Processual and, where appropriate, collective consent, ongoing member checking, and the use of pseudonyms, composite characters, or de-identification can help protect participants and communities while still allowing difficult stories to be told. Collaborative autoethnography further distributes ethical responsibility across research teams, enabling co-authors to negotiate boundaries, revise sensitive passages, and decide collectively what should enter the public record [12, 21]. Such practices do not eliminate ethical risk, but they make it more visible, explicitly negotiated, and contextually grounded.

4.3. Cultural Representation and Positional Reflexivity

Cultural representation poses a complex and persistent challenge. Cross-cultural autoethnographers must carefully navigate the tension between avoiding the reproduction of cultural stereotypes and maintaining critical distance while engaging empathetically with cultural Others. Reducing cultural bias requires dual commitments to intersubjectivity and reflexivity: drawing on multiple sources and perspectives to counter projection, while continuously interrogating one's positionality, emotional investments, and interpretive assumptions [22]. In comparative education, representations of the Other often encode intersecting cognitive and power biases, so even well-intentioned narratives can inadvertently reproduce cultural hierarchies and essentialized differences [16].

Thus, the central challenge is to transform the relationship between self and other into a dialogic, egalitarian process of mutual meaning-making and shared understanding.

Methodologically, this challenge can be addressed by designing studies that deliberately foreground dialogic and multi-voiced representation. Cross-cultural autoethnographers can draw on multiple data sources, invite feedback from interlocutors and readers, and situate their narratives alongside theoretical and historical analyses that contextualize individual experience [23, 31]. Meta-ethnographic syntheses of autoethnographies, such as Hughes and Noblit's work on race-related teaching [31], demonstrate how individual accounts can be read together to generate more nuanced, non-essentializing understandings of cultural difference and power. In classroom and professional settings, dialogic writing, collaborative autoethnography, and co-authored texts with students or community partners provide further means of sharing interpretive authority and resisting singular, totalizing representations of culture.

4.4. Pedagogical Implementation and Assessment

Implementing autoethnography within teaching and curriculum design introduces a range of practical challenges, particularly regarding instructional scaffolding and student assessment. Educators must consider how to design feasible and pedagogically sound frameworks that balance personal self-narration with rigorous cultural analysis [13]. Likewise, assessment criteria must be carefully constructed to prevent student writing from examining unstructured personal diaries or superficial theoretical summaries. Moderate autoethnography requires negotiating three tensions in academic writing: personal storytelling versus theoretical analysis, creative expression versus scholarly rigor, and self-disclosure versus ethical responsibility [13]. Successfully addressing these challenges requires that instructors possess both methodological fluency and the ability to translate complex cross-cultural theory into actionable pedagogy.

At the pedagogical level, these implementation challenges can be mitigated by developing clear curricular architectures, assessment rubrics, and staged writing tasks that scaffold students' movement from personal narrative to cultural analysis [13, 32]. Instructor training and peer-review protocols can help teachers support students' ethical decision-making, manage emotional and relational risks, and balance creativity with scholarly expectations. When autoethnography is embedded within broader cross-cultural curricula, such as Zhou's "5W" model for cultivating cross-cultural competence in English teacher education or project-based internationalized courses that cycle through experience, reflection, and recontextualization [32, 33], it functions as an integral component of reflective practice rather than an isolated or add-on activity.

5. Conclusions

Autoethnography serves as a distinctive methodological lens for investigating cross-cultural education by linking personal experience with cultural interpretation in a reflexive, relational, and ethically grounded manner. Throughout this review, we have highlighted how autoethnography moves beyond personal narrative to provide analytically generative insights into how individuals learn, teach, and negotiate cultural meaning in everyday educational contexts. Its value lies not simply in telling stories but in enabling educators and researchers to examine how cultural norms, identities, and power relations shape learning processes and professional practice.

This article has pursued three interrelated aims. First, it clarified the epistemological and ethical foundations that anchor autoethnographic inquiry, including its commitments to relationality, vulnerability, situated knowledge, and analytic reflexivity. Second, it synthesized how these foundations translate into methodological and pedagogical practice, particularly within teacher education and foreign-language learning; two domains where cross-cultural communication and identity negotiation occur in immediate and consequential ways. Third, it identified the methodological tensions and practical challenges associated with using autoethnography in educational settings, and outlined promising strategies for addressing concerns related to rigor, representation, and relational ethics.

Across the literature reviewed, several challenges remain persistent. Questions about methodological rigor and evaluative criteria continue to shape debates about autoethnography's scholarly legitimacy. Relational ethics, especially in contexts involving unequal power relations, sensitive cultural content, or institutional risk, require careful

navigation and pedagogical support. Issues of representation also pose dilemmas regarding how to depict culture without essentializing or reifying difference. In educational practice, the design of curricula and assessment frameworks determines whether autoethnography becomes a structured tool for deep intercultural learning or is reduced to unbounded personal expression.

Emerging scholarship, however, points toward constructive ways forward. Fit-for-purpose evaluative frameworks help align autoethnographic research with broader expectations for transparency and analytical depth. Dialogic, collaborative, and multi-voiced forms of writing offer strategies for sharing interpretive authority and expanding representational possibilities. In pedagogical settings, scaffolded curricular sequences, clear assessment rubrics, and targeted instructor preparation enable autoethnography to function as a systematic component of cross-cultural curricula. Such designs support learners in connecting personal reflection with theoretical insight, cultural analysis, and ethical engagement.

These directions suggest that the continued development of autoethnography in cross-cultural education depends on the integration of methodological innovation, ethical responsiveness, and pedagogical design. When approached as a structured, reflexive, and relational mode of inquiry, autoethnography equips educators and learners with tools to navigate cultural complexity, cultivate empathy, and critically examine their own positionalities. By bridging research and practice, it enriches the methodological repertoire of cross-cultural education and strengthens the potential for transformative, culturally responsive learning across diverse educational contexts.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, X.T. and Z.Z.; literature review, writing-original draft preparation, and writing-review and editing, X.T., Z.Z., and L.X.; supervision and project administration, L.X.; funding acquisition, X.T. and L.X. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. No AI-assisted tools were used to generate or develop the content of this manuscript. The entire study, including conceptualization, analysis, and writing, was conducted by the authors. Proper citations are provided for all referenced works.

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