

CASE-STUDY

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Philological education as a driver for cross-cultural collaboration in the Russian-Chinese educational context

Aida R. Nurutdinova^{1*}, Ding Siyu², Qiu Ciai³

¹Department of Contrastive Linguistics, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Kazan 420008, Russia.

²2 nd-year PhD Student, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Kazan 420008, Russia.

³1 st-year MA Student, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Kazan 420008, Russia.

***Corresponding author:** Aida R. Nurutdinova, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Contrastive Linguistics, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Build. 1, 18 Kremlyovskaya Street, Kazan, 420008, Russia; Email: AiRNurutdinova@kpfu.ru

Abstract: The deepening strategic partnership between Russia and China has intensified the need for educational models that foster genuine cross-cultural competence beyond surface-level linguistic proficiency. This paper argues that philological education (an integrated discipline of language, literature, and cultural interpretation) serves as a powerful yet underexplored driver for cross-cultural collaboration in the Russian-Chinese educational context. Employing a qualitative multiple-case study design, the research examines three bilateral educational initiatives involving philological curricula, faculty exchange, and joint research projects. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 educators and administrators, supplemented by document analysis of curricular frameworks and institutional agreements. The findings reveal that philologically grounded programs cultivate deeper intercultural empathy, create sustainable collaborative networks, and transform language learning into relational practice. Notably, such collaboration also demonstrated resilience as a form of “soft diplomacy”, sustaining institutional ties during periods of geopolitical tension. However, structural barriers (including divergent pedagogical traditions, asymmetrical language policies favoring English, and limited institutional flexibility) continue to hinder full integration. The study concludes that integrating philological approaches into international education strategies can transform language learning from transactional skill acquisition into a foundation for long-term cross-cultural partnership. Practical recommendations for curriculum design, institutional strategy, and educator development are discussed.

Keywords: Philological education; cross-cultural collaboration; Russian-Chinese educational cooperation; international education; intercultural competence



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1. Introduction

The strategic partnership between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades, evolving from bilateral diplomatic engagement into a comprehensive multidimensional alliance encompassing political coordination, economic integration, and intensifying educational cooperation^[1]. Yet the roots of Russian-Chinese educational exchange run much deeper. Formal academic contacts began in the early 20th century, intensified during the Soviet period when thousands of Chinese students studied in Soviet institutions, and experienced a significant revival following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This long history has endowed contemporary cooperation with institutional memory, established alumni networks, and a reservoir of mutual expectations that continue to shape present-day collaborations.

This historical foundation has been reinforced through numerous high-level initiatives in recent years, most notably the establishment of the Russian-Chinese Association of Universities in 2011, which has grown to include over 200 higher education institutions from both countries, and the creation of joint campuses such as Shenzhen MSU-BIT University, a pioneering collaborative venture between Lomonosov Moscow State University and Beijing Institute of Technology^[2]. These developments reflect a shared recognition that sustainable bilateral engagement requires not only diplomatic and economic alignment but also a robust foundation of mutual understanding cultivated through educational exchange.

Within this expanding landscape of international education, the dominant paradigm has been characterized by an instrumental approach to language learning and cross-cultural training. Russian as a Foreign Language and Chinese as a Foreign Language programs have proliferated, supported by government scholarship schemes such as the Russian Federation's quota for international students and China's Belt and Road Scholarship, which prioritize measurable outcomes such as language proficiency scores and short-term mobility metrics^[3; 4]. While these initiatives have succeeded in increasing the volume of student and faculty exchange, they have been critiqued for privileging transactional skill acquisition over the

cultivation of deeper cross-cultural understanding^[5]. This emphasis on instrumental language competence, frequently measured by standardized testing and framed within the discourse of workforce preparation, risks reducing the complex project of intercultural education to the acquisition of linguistic tools divorced from their cultural, historical, and literary contexts.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite the growing numbers of exchange participants and institutional partnerships, persistent challenges continue to undermine the quality and sustainability of Russian-Chinese cross-cultural educational encounters. Empirical studies have documented recurring patterns of cultural misunderstanding, stereotyping, and surface-level engagement among students and educators, which often remain unaddressed within conventional language curricula^[6; 7]. Moreover, while institutional agreements frequently cite the goal of fostering "mutual understanding" and "strategic collaboration," evidence suggests that the long-term collaborative outcomes (*such as joint research projects, sustained professional networks, and genuinely integrated curricula*) often fall short of stated ambitions^[1]. This disjuncture between policy rhetoric and pedagogical reality indicates a fundamental limitation in the prevailing international education model, which tends to prioritize quantifiable metrics of mobility and proficiency over the qualitative dimensions of cross-cultural relationship-building.

This paper argues that philological education (*understood as the holistic, integrated study of language within its cultural, historical, and literary contexts*) offers a critical yet underexplored pedagogical dimension capable of addressing these shortcomings. The philological tradition, with its roots in the hermeneutic interpretation of texts and its emphasis on the inseparability of language and culture, provides a framework for moving beyond instrumental language instruction toward what Byram terms "intercultural communicative competence" – the capacity to mediate between different cultural perspectives through critical reflection and empathy^[8]. In the specific context of Russian-Chinese educational cooperation, philological education holds particular promise: both nations possess rich, distinct philological traditions that can serve as points of dialogue and mutual enrichment rather than sources of cultural distance^[9; 10]. However,

the potential of philological approaches to serve as drivers for genuine cross-cultural collaboration remains largely unexplored in both scholarly literature and institutional practice.

1.3. Research Questions

To address this gap, the present study is guided by the following research questions:

1) How is philological education conceptualized and implemented within Russian-Chinese cross-cultural educational programs?

2) In what ways does philological education function as a driver for cross-cultural collaboration from the perspective of educators and administrators?

3) What barriers hinder the full integration of philological approaches in this bilateral context?

1.4. Significance of the Study

This research makes several contributions to the fields of international education and cross-cultural studies. *First*, it addresses an under-researched area at the intersection of philological education and Sino-Russian educational cooperation, a context that has received comparatively little scholarly attention despite its growing geopolitical and educational significance^[4]. *Second*, by foregrounding the perspectives of educators and administrators directly engaged in cross-cultural programs, the study provides empirical evidence that can inform a reorientation of language and culture education toward deeper, more sustainable collaborative outcomes. *Third*, the findings offer actionable insights for policymakers, curriculum developers, and university administrators seeking to move beyond instrumentalist approaches to international education and toward pedagogies that genuinely cultivate mutual understanding and long-term partnership. In an era of intensifying geopolitical complexity, understanding how educational practices can transcend national boundaries to foster authentic collaboration is not merely an academic question but a matter of considerable practical urgency.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative multiple-case study design, a methodological approach well-suited to investigating complex, context-dependent phenomena within real-life educational settings^[11]. The case study design was selected for its capacity to capture the

nuanced perspectives of participants, to explore the interplay between institutional structures and individual experiences, and to generate rich, contextualized understanding of how philological education operates within Russian-Chinese cross-cultural programs. As Stake argues, multiple-case designs enable researchers to examine a phenomenon across diverse contexts, facilitating both the identification of common patterns and the appreciation of unique contextual factors^[12]. This approach is particularly appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research questions, which seek to illuminate processes and meanings that remain underexplored in the existing literature^[13].

2.1. Case Selection

Cases were selected purposively to capture a range of institutional forms and collaborative modalities within Russian-Chinese educational cooperation. Purposive sampling, as Patton notes, allows researchers to intentionally select information-rich cases that are most likely to illuminate the research questions^[14]. The selection of these three specific cases was driven by three considerations.

- *First*, representativeness: the cases exemplify the predominant collaborative structures observed in Russian-Chinese educational partnerships, namely, formal joint degree programs, short-term faculty-led exchanges, and long-term research networks.

- *Second*, accessibility: the research team had established institutional contacts and prior working relationships with the selected programs, facilitating ethical access and participant recruitment.

- *Third*, variation: the cases were deliberately chosen to span a spectrum of collaborative intensity (from fully institutionalized to loosely networked) and temporal duration (from annual workshops to ongoing degree programs), thereby enabling a comparative analysis that captures the diverse ways philological education manifests across different collaborative formats.

The following three cases were selected:

Case 1: A Dual-Degree Undergraduate Program in Russian and Chinese Philology at a Joint University. This case represents a formally institutionalized, long-term collaborative program operating within a joint campus structure. The program offers students the opportunity to obtain degrees from both a Russian and a Chinese partner institution, with an integrated

curriculum combining language instruction, literary studies, and cultural history.

Case 2: A Faculty-Led Cross-Cultural Exchange Initiative Focusing on Literary and Pedagogical Workshops. This case represents a shorter-term, project-based form of collaboration organized by faculty members from Russian and Chinese universities. The initiative comprises annual workshops bringing together educators and graduate students for collaborative textual analysis, pedagogical exchange, and joint curriculum development.

Case 3: A Bilateral Research Network Dedicated to Comparative Slavic–Sinology Studies. This case represents a research-focused collaborative structure, consisting of a formal network of scholars from multiple Russian and Chinese institutions engaged in joint research projects, academic conferences, and publication initiatives in the field of comparative philology.

Access to Case 3 presented distinct challenges compared to the other two cases. Unlike the formally institutionalized programs in Cases 1 and 2, the research network operated through informal agreements and personal scholarly connections, with no centralized administrative structure to facilitate introductions. Gaining entry required sustained relationship-building through academic conferences and personal referrals from initial contacts – a process that extended the recruitment timeline by approximately three months. Two lessons emerged from this experience that may benefit future researchers. First, accessing informal collaborative structures often necessitates a “snowball” approach that begins with trusted institutional contacts who can vouch for the researcher's credibility within the network. Second, flexibility in recruitment timelines is essential, as informal networks may require multiple rounds of referral before sufficient access is achieved.

The selection of these three cases was guided by the principle of maximum variation, ensuring coverage of different collaborative formats (*institutionalized degree programs, project-based exchanges, and research networks*) thereby enhancing the transferability of findings across similar educational contexts^[15].

2.2. Participants

A total of 24 participants were recruited across the three cases. Participants comprised two distinct groups:

educators and administrators. The educator group included 12 participants (6 Russian, 6 Chinese) holding faculty positions in philology, language education, or comparative literature departments involved in the selected programs. The administrator group included 12 participants (6 Russian, 6 Chinese) occupying roles such as program coordinators, international office directors, and departmental deans with direct responsibility for the oversight and implementation of the collaborative initiatives.

Demographic information collected from participants revealed a balanced distribution across key characteristics (see Appendix 1). Among educators, teaching experience ranged from 5 to 28 years (mean = 12.4 years), with Russian participants averaging slightly longer careers (mean = 14.2 years) compared to Chinese participants (mean = 10.6 years). This difference may reflect the later introduction of Russian-language programs in Chinese higher education following the post-Soviet period, resulting in a comparatively younger cohort of Russian language educators in China. It also suggests that the Russian participants brought a longer accumulated experience with traditional philological curricula, potentially influencing their conceptualizations of the discipline. Among administrators, experience in international education roles ranged from 3 to 22 years (mean = 9.8 years). The gender distribution was 13 female (54%) and 11 male (46%), reflecting a relatively balanced representation across both national groups.

Participant recruitment was conducted through a combination of institutional contacts and snowball sampling. Initial contacts were established through publicly available institutional directories and prior professional networks, after which participants were invited to recommend other individuals with relevant experience^[16]. This approach proved particularly effective in accessing the relatively specialized population of educators and administrators engaged in Russian-Chinese philological collaboration. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study aims and procedures, and written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

2.3. Data Collection

Data collection employed two primary methods: semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

• *Semi-Structured Interviews*. Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Russian, Mandarin Chinese, or English according to participant preference, and were audio-recorded with permission. The interview protocol was designed to explore participants' experiences of cross-cultural collaboration, their conceptualizations of philological education, their perceptions of barriers and enablers, and their reflections on program outcomes. The semi-structured format, as advocated by Kvale and Brinkmann, allowed for flexibility in pursuing emergent themes while maintaining consistent coverage of core research questions ^[17]. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with transcripts in Russian and Mandarin subsequently translated into English by bilingual research assistants following a process of back-translation to ensure accuracy ^[18].

• *Document Analysis*. To complement and contextualize interview data, a range of documents was collected and analyzed. These included curriculum syllabi from the selected programs, institutional cooperation agreements, program reports, internal evaluation documents, and publicly available promotional materials. Document analysis, as Bowen notes, provides a valuable source of data that can corroborate findings from interviews, offer historical context, and illuminate institutional priorities and policy frameworks that shape educational practice ^[19].

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six-phase framework for thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke, a flexible and accessible method well-suited to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data ^[20].

In *Phase 1 (familiarization with the data)*, all interview transcripts and documents were read and re-read repeatedly to establish deep familiarity with the content. Analytic memos were maintained throughout this phase to record initial impressions and emerging patterns. *Phase 2 (generating initial codes)* involved systematic coding of the entire dataset using NVivo 14 software. Coding was conducted iteratively, beginning with open coding to capture descriptive content, followed by more focused coding to group codes into potential categories ^[21]. *Phase 3 (searching for*

themes) involved collating codes into broader thematic categories, using visual mapping techniques to explore relationships between categories. *Phase 4 (reviewing themes)* entailed refining the thematic structure through iterative review against coded extracts and the full dataset, ensuring that themes accurately represented the data. *Phase 5 (defining and naming themes)* involved articulating the essence of each theme and establishing clear thematic definitions. *Phase 6 (producing the report)* is addressed in the Results and Discussion sections that follow.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. Triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources (interviews and documents) and the inclusion of participants from different institutional roles and national contexts ^[22]. Member checking was conducted by returning summaries of preliminary findings to a subset of participants (n = 8) for verification of accuracy and interpretation ^[23]. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the research process to document the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and decision-making, thereby enhancing transparency and reducing the influence of unconscious bias ^[24].

3. Results

This section presents the findings derived from thematic analysis of interview transcripts and documentary sources across the three cases. The results are organized according to the major themes that emerged from the analytical process, beginning with conceptualizations of philological education in the bilateral context, followed by themes related to philological education as a driver for cross-cultural collaboration, barriers and tensions, and finally unexpected outcomes.

3.1. Conceptualizations of Philological Education in the Bilateral Context

Analysis revealed divergent understandings of philological education between Russian and Chinese participants, reflecting distinct intellectual traditions and institutional histories. Russian participants predominantly conceptualized philology in classical terms, emphasizing historical linguistics, textual analysis, and the literary canon. As one Russian educator explained: "*For us, philology is not merely language instruction. It is the study of language as a historical phenomenon, the careful reading of literary*

texts, the understanding of how meaning is constructed across centuries. This tradition goes back to the nineteenth century – to Potebnaya, to Veselovsky – and it shapes how we train our students” (Educator R3, interview, 2025).

This orientation was consistently articulated across Russian participants, who framed philology as a rigorous scholarly discipline concerned with the deep structures of language and the hermeneutic interpretation of texts^[9]. Documentary analysis of Russian curriculum syllabi confirmed this emphasis, revealing required courses in Old Church Slavonic, historical grammar, and the history of literary criticism that have no direct equivalents in the Chinese programs examined. Conversely, Chinese program documents emphasized applied modules such as “Russian for Business Communication,” “Cross-Cultural Pragmatics,” and “Contemporary Russian Media Discourse” – courses designed to develop practical language competence in professional and intercultural settings. These contrasting curricular priorities illustrate the divergent institutional interpretations of philological education in the two national contexts.

In contrast, Chinese participants articulated a more applied understanding of philological education, foregrounding language as cultural practice and cross-cultural communication. A Chinese administrator articulated this perspective: “Our approach to what we call philology – though we do not always use this term – is more pragmatic. We ask: how does language function in real intercultural encounters? How do we prepare students to communicate effectively with Russian colleagues, to understand not just words but intentions, expectations, cultural logics?” (Administrator C2, interview, 2025).

This applied orientation aligns with the broader emphasis in Chinese foreign language education on communicative competence and practical outcomes^[10]. Documentary evidence from Chinese program documents highlighted learning objectives focused on “cross-cultural communication skills”, “applied language proficiency”, and “practical competence in Sino-Russian professional contexts” – terminology largely absent from Russian curricular materials.

Notably, hybrid programs that brought Russian and Chinese educators together in sustained collaboration appeared to create what one participant termed a

“negotiated third space” (Educator R5, interview, 2025), where these divergent traditions could converge. In Case 1, the dual-degree program required faculty from both countries to collaboratively redesign the curriculum, resulting in a hybrid model that integrated Russian-style textual analysis with Chinese-style communicative application. As one program coordinator observed: “The first year was difficult – we had very different ideas about what students should read, how they should be assessed, what the purpose of the program was. But over time, we developed a shared language. Now our graduates have both the deep textual skills that the Russian tradition values and the practical intercultural competence that the Chinese system prioritizes” (Administrator R4, interview, 2025).

3.2. Philological Education as a Driver for Cross-Cultural Collaboration

Three interrelated themes emerged regarding how philological education functions as a driver for cross-cultural collaboration.

Theme 1: Deepening Intercultural Empathy. Participants consistently described how engagement with literary texts, translation exercises, and analysis of cultural subtext fostered nuanced understanding that transcended superficial stereotypes. A Chinese educator elaborated: “When my students translate Russian poetry, they cannot simply substitute words. They must understand the emotional register, the historical references, the unspoken cultural assumptions. This process forces them to step into a Russian consciousness. It is not about memorizing cultural facts – it is about learning to feel from within another cultural framework” (Educator C4, interview, 2025).

This finding resonates with Byram's conceptualization of intercultural competence as involving not only knowledge but also the capacity to “decenter” from one's own cultural perspective^[8]. Russian participants reported parallel experiences when engaging with Chinese literary and philosophical texts, noting that the interpretive labor required by philological study created opportunities for genuine cross-cultural insight. As one Russian educator reflected: “Before working with Chinese colleagues on comparative analysis of Pushkin and Lu Xun, I thought I understood something about Chinese culture. But the

depth required by our joint seminars (the close reading, the attention to historical context, the discussion of interpretive traditions) revealed how superficial my understanding had been” (Educator R2, interview, 2025).

Theme 2: Creating Sustainable Collaborative Networks. Philological projects (including joint translations, comparative literature seminars, and co-authored research) emerged as powerful mechanisms for generating ongoing professional relationships and shared intellectual ownership. In Case 3, the bilateral research network had produced a series of collaborative publications, including a co-edited volume on comparative approaches to narrative structure in Russian and Chinese literary traditions.

A network participant described the relational outcomes of such work: “When you translate a text together, when you argue about the meaning of a single word, when you work through a difficult passage and finally arrive at a shared interpretation – this creates bonds that go far beyond professional acquaintance. You become intellectually invested in one another’s thinking. That investment sustains collaboration long after a project concludes” (Educator R6, interview, 2025). Documentary analysis of institutional agreements revealed that while formal cooperation documents emphasized institutional-level outcomes such as student mobility numbers and joint degrees, the most sustained collaborations were those grounded in shared philological projects that generated ongoing interpersonal engagement^[5].

Theme 3: Transforming Language Learning into Relational Practice. A third theme concerned the shift from language-as-tool to language-as-relationship – a transformation that participants identified as central to genuine cross-cultural collaboration. A Chinese administrator articulated this distinction: “Many of our students’ approach Russian as a tool: they learn vocabulary, grammar, structures. This is necessary but insufficient. What philological education does (when it is done well) is transform the student’s relationship to the language. The language becomes a medium of relationship, not merely an instrument of transaction. This is when real collaboration becomes possible” (Administrator C1, interview, 2025).

Participants described how this transformation was fostered through activities such as joint literary

seminars, translation workshops requiring sustained dialogue, and comparative analysis of cultural texts that invited personal reflection. These approaches, as one Russian educator noted, created conditions for trust to develop: “When you are discussing the motivations of a character in Dostoevsky with a Chinese colleague, and you find yourself sharing personal interpretations, revealing how you understand human behavior – this is a form of vulnerability. It builds trust in ways that formal institutional meetings never can” (Educator R1, interview, 2025).

3.3. Barriers and Tensions

Despite the potential of philological education to drive cross-cultural collaboration, participants identified significant barriers that hindered its full integration.

Structural Asymmetries. Chinese participants consistently noted that English functions as the dominant lingua franca in international education, often marginalizing Russian-Chinese philological collaboration. As one Chinese administrator explained: “Institutional incentives strongly favor English-language publications, English-medium instruction, partnerships with Western universities. Our Russian collaborations, however valuable, are often treated as secondary. Students ask: will this help my English? Faculty ask: will this count toward my publication requirements in international journals?” (Administrator C3, interview, 2025).

This structural marginalization was reflected in resource allocation patterns documented in institutional reports, which showed significantly greater investment in English-language programs and partnerships than in Russian-Chinese initiatives^[1]. Russian participants, conversely, identified rigid curriculum structures as a primary barrier. One Russian educator observed: “Our state educational standards specify precisely what courses must be taught, how many hours, what competencies must be assessed. There is very little flexibility to create new collaborative courses with Chinese colleagues, to experiment with joint teaching, to adapt the curriculum to the specific needs of our partnership” (Educator R4, interview, 2025).

Pedagogical Divergence. Participants from both countries identified tensions arising from divergent pedagogical traditions. Russian participants described a teacher-centered approach emphasizing lectures,

memorization of canonical texts, and individual assessment, while Chinese participants noted a shift toward more interactive, student-centered methods in contemporary Chinese education. A Chinese educator described the resulting friction: *“When we co-teach courses, the differences become immediately apparent. My Russian colleague expects students to sit quietly, to listen, to absorb authoritative knowledge. I am trying to encourage discussion, debate, student-led inquiry. Students become confused about expectations, and we struggle to find common ground”* (Educator C5, interview, 2025). These pedagogical tensions, while challenging, were not insurmountable. Some participants described gradual adaptation and mutual learning, though this required sustained dialogue and institutional support that was not always available^[7].

Resource Constraints. Across all three cases, participants identified significant resource constraints. The shortage of bilingual teaching materials was repeatedly cited, with one Russian educator noting: *“There are excellent textbooks for teaching Russian to Chinese students or Chinese to Russian students – but these are designed for language instruction, not for philological study. We need materials that support the kind of deep textual analysis, the comparative work, that we aspire to do. These do not exist, and developing them requires time and expertise that we do not have”* (Educator R3, interview, 2025). Limited funding for joint philological research and heavy faculty workloads were also identified as barriers that constrained the development and sustainability of collaborative initiatives.

3.4. Philological collaboration as soft diplomacy

Beyond the three core themes identified above, a further theme emerged inductively from the analysis, concerning the role of philological collaboration as a mechanism for sustaining institutional relationships during periods of geopolitical tension. Participants across multiple cases described how shared philological work enabled the maintenance of academic ties even when broader bilateral relations became strained. As one Russian administrator reflected: *“When political tensions arose, our institutional partnership with the Chinese university could have been suspended many international partnerships were. But because we had built such deep relationships through joint research,*

through shared intellectual projects, both institutions chose to continue. The philological work had created a foundation that survived political pressure” (Administrator R5, interview, 2025).

This theme suggests that philological collaboration may serve as a form of cultural diplomacy that operates independently of, and sometimes resiliently against, shifting geopolitical dynamics. A Chinese educator offered a complementary perspective: *“Our joint translation project continues regardless of what happens in the news. When we sit together with a text, working through its meaning, the political world recedes. This is not to say politics does not matter but the work creates a space that is protected, where cross-cultural understanding can develop even when official relations are difficult”* (Educator C6, interview, 2025). This emergent theme, while not the focus of the original research questions, points to potentially significant implications for understanding the role of humanities education in sustaining international cooperation under challenging conditions.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the central proposition that philological education can function as a meaningful driver for cross-cultural collaboration within the Russian-Chinese educational context. Returning to the first research question regarding conceptualizations of philological education, the results reveal a productive tension between Russian classical philological traditions and Chinese applied orientations, a divergence that, rather than proving insurmountable, created opportunities for what one participant termed a “negotiated third space” where hybrid pedagogical approaches could emerge. This finding suggests that the very differences in educational traditions that are often framed as obstacles to international collaboration may, under appropriate institutional conditions, become resources for mutual enrichment^[9, 10].

In response to the second research question concerning how philological education functions as a driver for collaboration, the three themes identified (*deepening intercultural empathy, creating sustainable collaborative networks, and transforming language learning into relational practice*) collectively illustrate a process through which shared engagement with

language, literature, and interpretation generates what Bourdieu terms “cultural capital” that is jointly produced and mutually valued ^[25]. This aligns with Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence, which posits that genuine intercultural understanding requires not only linguistic proficiency but also the capacity to “savoir s'engager” – to critically engage with and mediate between different cultural frameworks ^[8]. However, the findings extend Byram's framework by demonstrating how philologically grounded collaboration moves beyond individual competence toward the creation of sustained institutional relationships. Participants described how joint translation projects, comparative seminars, and co-authored research produced not merely enhanced individual intercultural skills but durable relational structures (*professional networks, shared intellectual commitments, and institutional trust*) that persisted across time and, in some cases, geopolitical turbulence.

This extension points toward a broader reconceptualization of philological practice in cross-cultural contexts. The findings support the notion of *collaborative philology* – a framework in which language and cultural study are understood not as the transmission of knowledge from one cultural tradition to another, but as a jointly constructed, dialogic enterprise. Collaborative philology rests on four core components:

1) *Dialogic interpretation* positions textual analysis as a process of mutual exploration rather than unidirectional expertise. Russian and Chinese participants in this study described how working together on literary texts revealed interpretive assumptions that would otherwise remain invisible, transforming the classroom into a space where multiple interpretive traditions encounter one another;

2) *Shared intellectual ownership* emerges when collaborative projects (such as joint translations, co-authored research, or co-designed curricula) produce outcomes that belong to neither tradition alone but are co-created. This ownership fosters sustained professional relationships, as participants in Case 3 demonstrated through their ongoing research network;

3) *Relational language practice* reorients language learning away from instrumental skill acquisition toward the cultivation of interpersonal trust and mutual vulnerability. As participants described,

engaging deeply with another's cultural texts requires a willingness to risk misunderstanding and to share personal interpretations – conditions that build relational depth;

4) *Institutional embeddedness* acknowledges that collaborative philology requires structural support to be sustainable. The most successful initiatives in this study were those where institutions provided protected time, flexible curricula, and recognition for collaborative work – enabling the relational dimensions of philology to flourish.

Together, these four components distinguish collaborative philology from traditional approaches, framing cross-cultural philological education as a space of mutual discovery rather than cultural transmission.

This extension is significant because it addresses a limitation of much intercultural competence research, which has tended to focus on individual outcomes rather than the relational and institutional dimensions of cross-cultural collaboration ^[26]. The present findings suggest that philological education, precisely because it requires sustained, interpretive engagement with cultural texts and traditions, provides conditions conducive to the development of what can be termed “collaborative intercultural capital” – resources that are held collectively and that enable ongoing joint enterprise.

Regarding the third research question on barriers, the findings confirm that structural asymmetries, pedagogical divergence, and resource constraints present significant obstacles to philological collaboration. The marginalization of Russian-Chinese partnerships in institutional contexts dominated by English-language priorities reflects broader patterns identified in the literature on language hierarchies in international education ^[1: 5]. Similarly, the pedagogical tensions identified resonate with comparative education scholarship highlighting the challenges of aligning divergent teaching traditions ^[7]. However, the finding that these barriers were navigated successfully in some cases, particularly where sustained dialogue and institutional flexibility were present, suggests that they are not deterministic but rather contingent on institutional design and leadership.

Taken together, the findings argue against instrumentalist approaches to international education that prioritize short-term mobility, standardized

language proficiency metrics, and transactional exchange. Such approaches, as Safonova has critiqued, risk reducing cross-cultural education to the acquisition of surface-level skills divorced from the deeper cultural and historical contexts that give language meaning^[3]. In contrast, the present study suggests that philological education provides what might be termed a “deep structure” for cross-cultural collaboration – a foundation of shared interpretive practice, mutual intellectual investment, and relational trust upon which sustainable partnership can be built. This deep structure is not incidental to cross-cultural outcomes but rather constitutive of them.

4.1. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to theoretical understanding in two principal ways. *First*, it proposes the concept of *collaborative philology* as a framework for conceptualizing language and cultural study as a jointly constructed enterprise rather than a one-way transmission of cultural knowledge. Traditional approaches to philological education, in both Russian and Chinese contexts, have often been characterized by a unidirectional model in which a cultural tradition is transmitted from expert to novice, from native speaker to learner, from source culture to recipient culture^[9; 10]. The collaborative philology framework emerging from this study instead conceptualizes interpretation, textual analysis, and cultural meaning-making as dialogic processes in which participants from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds engage in mutual exploration. This framework draws on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, which emphasizes that meaning emerges from the interaction between multiple voices and perspectives^[27], and on Gadamer's hermeneutic insight that understanding is not reproduction but a fusion of horizons^[28]. In the collaborative philology model, the classroom or research seminar becomes a space where Russian and Chinese interpretive traditions encounter one another, generating meanings that are not reducible to either tradition alone.

Second, the study contributes to international education theory by demonstrating how discipline-specific pedagogical traditions (in this case, philology) can mediate cross-cultural partnership. Much international education scholarship has focused on generic models of intercultural competence or

on institutional structures such as student mobility programs^[8; 29]. Less attention has been paid to how the substantive content and pedagogical practices of specific academic disciplines shape cross-cultural encounter. The present study suggests that philology with its emphasis on close textual reading, historical contextualization, and interpretive dialogue, possesses distinctive affordances for cross-cultural collaboration. These affordances are not inherent in the discipline but emerge when philological practices are intentionally oriented toward dialogic exchange. This insight points toward a broader theoretical agenda: understanding how different academic disciplines (history, philosophy, anthropology, the natural sciences) might each offer distinctive resources for cross-cultural education, and how these disciplinary affordances might be mobilized in service of international educational aims.

4.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry several practical implications for curriculum design, institutional strategy, and educator development.

For *curriculum design*, the results suggest the value of integrating comparative literary analysis, translation projects, and co-taught courses that pair Russian and Chinese faculty. Participants in Case 1, where the dual-degree program incorporated such elements, reported the most sustained collaboration and the most positive outcomes. Specific curricular interventions that emerged from the findings include: (a) joint seminars focusing on paired literary texts from Russian and Chinese traditions, structured around comparative interpretation; (b) collaborative translation workshops in which Russian and Chinese students work together on texts from both languages; (c) curriculum modules that explicitly address the divergent philological traditions of both countries, enabling students to understand not only each other's languages but each other's approaches to language study. These interventions shift the emphasis from language acquisition as an individual achievement to interpretation as a collaborative practice.

For *institutional strategy*, the findings underscore the need for dedicated funding for bilateral philological research groups and the development of joint degree tracks explicitly centered on philology. Participants consistently identified resource constraints (lack of

bilingual materials, limited funding, heavy workloads) as significant barriers. Institutional strategies to address these barriers might include: (a) establishing competitive grant programs specifically for Russian-Chinese philological collaboration; (b) creating faculty exchange programs that provide protected time for collaborative curriculum development and research; (c) developing institutional policies that recognize joint publications, co-taught courses, and collaborative translation work as legitimate scholarly output for promotion and tenure. Without such structural support, the collaborative initiatives described in this study remain dependent on individual faculty commitment and risk being unsustainable.

For *educator development*, the findings point to the importance of cross-cultural pedagogical training that addresses divergent teaching traditions. The pedagogical tensions identified (between teacher-centered and interactive approaches, between emphasis on canonical authority and critical inquiry) are not merely matters of individual preference but reflect deeply embedded educational cultures^[7]. Professional development initiatives that bring Russian and Chinese educators together to examine these differences explicitly, to articulate their own pedagogical assumptions, and to collaboratively develop hybrid approaches may be essential. Such initiatives should be designed not to erase differences but to enable educators to navigate them productively, transforming pedagogical divergence from a source of friction into an opportunity for mutual learning.

4.3. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The number of cases (three) and participants (24) is relatively small, and while purposive sampling was appropriate for the exploratory aims of the research, the findings cannot be generalized to the full range of Russian-Chinese educational collaborations. The focus on higher education means that the findings may not apply to secondary or primary educational contexts. Additionally, the study captured only educator and administrator perspectives; the voices of students (whose experiences of cross-cultural philological education are central to understanding its outcomes) were not directly included. Future research should prioritize student perspectives through

longitudinal designs that track intercultural competence development over the course of philologically grounded programs.

The emergent finding regarding philological collaboration as a “soft diplomacy” mechanism during periods of geopolitical tension, while not a central focus of this study, warrants systematic investigation. Future research might examine whether humanities-based educational collaborations demonstrate distinctive resilience to geopolitical pressures compared to other forms of international partnership, and what conditions enable such resilience. Comparative studies with other country dyads (for example, Russian-German, Chinese-Japanese, or Sino-American philological collaborations) would help determine the extent to which the findings of this study are specific to the Russian-Chinese context or reflect broader patterns.

Addressing the absence of student perspectives in the current study, the authors are planning a follow-up mixed-methods study that will center on student experiences within the same three cases. This future research will employ pre- and post-program surveys to measure changes in intercultural competence, complemented by focus group interviews to capture students' lived experiences of collaborative philological education. The longitudinal design will track student cohorts across their full program duration, enabling analysis of how intercultural competence develops over time and whether the relational outcomes identified in this study are similarly experienced by students. This work is currently in the stage, with anticipated data collection commencing in the 2025–2026 academic year.

Finally, quantitative assessment of philology-based interventions, perhaps using validated measures of intercultural competence, would complement the qualitative findings presented here and provide evidence for the effectiveness of such approaches that might be persuasive to institutional policymakers.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate whether and how philological education might function as a driver for cross-cultural collaboration in the Russian-Chinese educational context. The findings suggest that it does not automatically, but under conditions that foster sustained dialogue, mutual adaptation, and institutional

support. When Russian and Chinese educators engage together in the interpretation of texts, the translation of works, the co-construction of curricula, something beyond language learning occurs. Participants in this study described a transformation: *language study becoming relational practice, cultural understanding deepening into intercultural empathy, professional exchange generating sustained collaborative networks*. In some cases, these relationships proved resilient even when broader geopolitical relations became strained.

These findings carry an implication that extends beyond the specific context of Russian-Chinese educational cooperation. In an era when international education is increasingly framed in instrumental terms (as workforce preparation, as skills development, as measurable outcomes) the philological tradition reminds us that language is never merely a tool. Language is a carrier of history, a repository of culture, a medium of relationship. To learn another's language, in the full philological sense, is to engage with the world as that language has shaped it – its literature, its philosophies, its ways of seeing. And to engage together in that learning, across cultural boundaries, is to build something that transcends the transactional exchange of skills.

This study concludes with a call to reposition philology from a traditional humanities discipline (often marginalized in contemporary higher education) to a strategic asset in international education policy. The challenges of cross-cultural collaboration in an increasingly complex and interconnected world are not merely technical problems of language proficiency or mobility logistics. They are interpretive problems: problems of understanding across difference, of building trust across historical divides, of finding shared meaning across divergent cultural frameworks. These are precisely the problems that philological education, at its best, equips students and educators to address. To move international education “more than words” (from superficial exchange to deep, sustained collaboration) is to recognize the philological foundations upon which such collaboration depends.

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Author's Contributions

Aida R. Nurutdinova: Conceptualization, research design, methodology development, supervision of data collection, validation of findings, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing, project administration.

Ding Siyu: Data collection (Chinese institutions), participant recruitment, interview coordination, document analysis (Chinese language sources), translation verification, data curation, writing – original draft preparation (Results section).

Qiu Ciai: Data collection (Chinese institutions), transcription of Chinese-language interviews, preliminary data coding, literature review, writing – original draft preparation (Methods section), manuscript formatting.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Ethics Statement

Given that the study involved human participants (educators and administrators), all participants were provided with detailed written information about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. All interview data were anonymized, and identifying information has been removed to protect participant confidentiality.

Availability of Supporting Data

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions concerning participant confidentiality. Anonymized interview transcripts and coded datasets may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to approval from the institutional ethics committee. The document analysis materials (curriculum syllabi, institutional cooperation agreements, and program reports) are available from the respective institutional archives; excerpts cited in this manuscript are included within the text.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The research was conducted independently without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. The funding sources (if any) had no role in the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, writing of the manuscript, or the decision to submit the article for publication.

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Appendix A: Participant demographic summary

All participants were assigned anonymized identifiers (e.g., Educator R1–R6, Educator C1–C6, Administrator R1–R6, Administrator C1–C6) to protect confidentiality while enabling attribution of quotations in the Results section.

Characteristic	Educators (n = 12)	Administrators (n = 12)	Total (N = 24)
Nationality			
Russian	6	6	12
Chinese	6	6	12
Gender			
Female	7	6	13
Male	5	6	11
Years of Experience			
Range	5–28 years	3–22 years	3–28 years
Mean (Russian)	14.2 years	10.1 years	
Mean (Chinese)	10.6 years	9.5 years	
Mean (Overall)	12.4 years	9.8 years	
Position Type			
Professor/Associate Professor	8	–	8
Lecturer/Senior Lecturer	4	–	4
Program Coordinator	–	5	5
International Office Director	–	4	4
Department Dean	–	3	3

Appendix B: Semi-structured interview guides

This appendix provides the core interview protocols used for data collection. The questions were designed to be open-ended, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. Probes (indicated in italics) were used flexibly to deepen understanding and were not always asked in the exact order shown. All interviews were conducted in the participant's preferred language (Russian, Mandarin Chinese, or English).

B.1 Interview Guide for Educators

SECTION 1: BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE

1. Please describe your current teaching position and how long you have been involved in Russian-Chinese educational cooperation. *Probe: What courses do you teach? How did you become involved in this program?*

2. How would you define “philological education” in your own words? *Probe: What does this term mean in your institutional context? Does it differ from how colleagues from the other country understand it?*

SECTION 2: CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PHILOLOGICAL EDUCATION

3. In your view, what are the main goals of philological education within the framework of cross-cultural collaboration? *Probe: Is it more about language proficiency, cultural knowledge, textual analysis, or something else?*

4. How does your curriculum reflect these goals? *Probe: Could you give an example of a course, assignment, or activity that you consider particularly effective for cross-cultural learning?*

SECTION 3: COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES AND OUTCOMES

5. Can you describe a specific instance where philological study (e.g., joint translation, comparative literature seminar) led to meaningful cross-cultural understanding? *Probe: What made that experience successful? Were there any challenges?*

6. In your experience, how do collaborative philological projects (such as co-teaching, joint research, or shared translation work) affect professional relationships with colleagues from the other country? *Probe: Do these*

activities create lasting professional networks?

SECTION 4: BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

7. What obstacles, if any, have you encountered in trying to integrate philological approaches into cross-cultural programs? *Probe: Consider institutional policies, resource limitations, pedagogical differences, language issues.*

8. How do you address differences in teaching traditions between Russian and Chinese educational systems? *Probe: Can you give an example of a tension and how it was resolved?*

SECTION 5: REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9. What do you see as the most important outcomes of philological education for cross-cultural collaboration? *Probe: What impact does it have on students? On your own professional development?*

10. If you could change one thing to improve philological collaboration between Russian and Chinese universities, what would it be? *Probe: What support would be most helpful?*

B.2 Interview Guide for Administrators

SECTION 1: ROLE AND CONTEXT

1. Please describe your current administrative position and your responsibilities related to Russian-Chinese educational programs. *Probe: How long have you been involved in this area? What programs or initiatives do you oversee?*

2. From an institutional perspective, what are the primary goals of your university's collaboration with partners in the other country? *Probe: How do these goals align with philological education?*

SECTION 2: INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND PHILOLOGICAL EDUCATION

3. How does your institution conceptualize philological education in the context of international cooperation? *Probe: Is it treated as a language service, a humanities discipline, or a strategic asset?*

4. What policies or structures exist to support philological collaboration (e.g., joint degrees, exchange agreements, research networks)? *Probe: How are these policies implemented in practice?*

SECTION 3: PERCEPTIONS OF COLLABORATION OUTCOMES

5. In your view, what are the most significant outcomes of philologically focused collaborations? *Probe: Consider student learning, faculty development, institutional reputation, or other dimensions.*

6. Can you share an example of a collaborative philological initiative that you consider particularly successful? *Probe: What factors contributed to its success?*

SECTION 4: BARRIERS AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

7. What institutional barriers hinder deeper philological collaboration between Russian and Chinese universities? *Probe: Consider funding, curriculum rigidity, language hierarchies (e.g., dominance of English), accreditation requirements.*

8. How does your institution navigate differences in educational traditions or academic cultures? *Probe: Are there formal mechanisms for addressing these differences?*

SECTION 5: STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES

9. How do you see the role of philological education evolving in your institution's international strategy over the next five years? *Probe: What resources or policy changes would be needed to realize that vision?*

10. What advice would you give to other institutions seeking to build sustainable cross-cultural collaboration through philological education? *Probe: What have you learned from successes or setbacks?*