

The Effect of Cultural Fit on The Sino-Foreign Joint Venture Performance of The Automobile Industry in China

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Abstract: This study investigates the effect of cultural fit on the performance of Sino-foreign joint ventures (SJVs) in the Chinese automobile industry. Drawing upon Cultural Fit Theory, the research analyzes how compatibility in cultural dimensions between Chinese and foreign partners influences joint venture outcomes. A positivist, quantitative methodology employing survey data and covariance-based structural equation modeling (CBSEM) was used. Results reveal a strong positive relationship between cultural fit and joint venture performance, emphasizing the critical role of cultural alignment in SJV success. The implications suggest that cultivating cultural synergy is essential for sustained performance in international collaborations.

Keywords: Cultural Fit, Automobile Industry, Sino-Foreign Joint Venture Performance, China, Cultural Fit Theory

1. Introduction

The Chinese automobile industry has experienced exponential growth over the past two decades, becoming a magnet for global automotive investment. In 2023, China produced over 30 million vehicles, reaffirming its status as the world's largest automobile market (Gao et al., 2024). Sino-foreign joint ventures (SJVs) have emerged as a critical strategy for foreign firms to penetrate the Chinese market, encouraged by favourable regulatory policies and the promise of tapping into the world's largest consumer base (Ding, 2021). Despite this success, many SJVs struggle with achieving optimal performance. A common reason for underperformance is cultural misalignment between the partnering entities. While previous research has extensively examined factors like strategic fit or organizational synergy, there is growing consensus that cultural compatibility, termed cultural fit, plays a more foundational role in determining joint venture success (Chi & Gao, 2024). This paper investigates how cultural fit specifically influences SJV performance in the Chinese automobile sector, which is both culturally complex and economically strategic.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of the Automobile Industry in China

The development of China's automobile industry has been deeply intertwined with the nation's broader economic liberalization and industrial policy agendas. Since surpassing the United States in 2009 as the world's largest automobile market, China has continuously scaled up its production, reaching over 30 million units in 2023 (Chen et al., 2020). This growth trajectory has been significantly shaped by both demand-side factors such as a burgeoning middle class and urbanization, and supply-side strategies, including state-led industrial upgrades and foreign technology assimilation. A notable trend in recent years is the rapid rise of new energy vehicles (NEVs), which has redefined the strategic priorities of the sector. China's new energy vehicle sales exceeded 7 million units in 2023, accounting for nearly 60% of the global market, demonstrating extremely high market penetration and industry leadership (Duan, 2025). This transition has drawn further foreign interest, particularly from firms seeking to align with China's dual carbon goals and benefit from its maturing battery and digital infrastructure ecosystems (Yue et al., 2024).

In this landscape, Sino-foreign joint ventures have served as the primary organizational form through which foreign automakers access the Chinese market. Although the regulatory requirement for joint ventures has been relaxed since 2022, the majority of foreign automotive activity in China remains JV-based. This enduring prevalence of JVs is not only institutional but strategic, providing foreign firms with local market intelligence, established supply chains, and political legitimacy. As noted by Duanmu & Lawton (2021), JVs continue to be a preferred mode for navigating policy uncertainty and adapting to fast-changing consumer expectations.

Moreover, industrial policies such as the “Made in China 2025” initiative and the New Energy Vehicle Industry Development Plan (2021–2035) have incentivized technological cooperation and R&D localization in JVs (Branstetter & Li, 2022). These policies underscore a shift from mere production capacity toward innovation and brand-building, emphasizing the need for close integration between partners. Recent research also highlights how such integration is contingent on the relational and cultural alignment between JV partners, which directly affects joint learning, innovation output, and ultimately, performance (Jin & Wang, 2021).

Collectively, these dynamics position the Chinese automobile industry not only as a growth market, but also as a complex institutional environment where joint venture success hinges increasingly on softer, relational factors, particularly cultural fit.

2.2 Overview of Sino-foreign Joint Ventures

Sino-foreign joint ventures (SJVs) have long been the cornerstone of international business operations in China, particularly in highly regulated and strategic sectors such as the automotive industry. Traditionally mandated by foreign investment laws, these partnerships required foreign firms to enter the Chinese market through alliances with domestic firms, thus enabling technology transfer and managerial learning on the Chinese side while providing access to local resources for foreign investors (Kuntner, 2020). However, beyond their initial institutional rationale, SJVs have evolved into complex organizational arrangements requiring deep relational cooperation between culturally distinct partners.

Recent research indicates that SJVs remain the dominant mode of market entry for foreign automakers despite regulatory relaxations that now permit wholly foreign-owned enterprises (WFOEs) (Li et al., 2024). This preference is attributed to the enduring value of local legitimacy, distribution networks, and government connections that domestic partners bring to the table. Additionally, SJVs facilitate adaptation to the Chinese consumer base, which is increasingly sophisticated and brand-aware, necessitating nuanced marketing and product strategies that are better executed with local insight (Zhang, 2024).

Several studies underscore the operational complexities that SJVs entail, particularly in aligning strategic priorities, managerial practices, and corporate governance structures between partners with divergent institutional and cultural backgrounds. As highlighted by Chi & Gao (2024), the relational quality of these ventures, embodied in mutual trust, communication clarity, and decision-making harmony, has emerged as a key predictor of performance.

Furthermore, the shift in China’s policy landscape, including the phasing out of equity restrictions and introduction of more market-oriented reforms, has shifted the calculus for many foreign firms. Rather than defaulting to JVs for regulatory reasons, firms now consider them as strategic alliances where cultural fit and learning capability are central to long-term success (Liang et al., 2024). As such, the contemporary SJV is increasingly evaluated not only for its structural configuration but also for its relational infrastructure, with cultural fit playing a central role in mitigating integration challenges and enhancing synergy.

This evolving understanding situates SJVs not merely as vehicles of market access but as complex cross-cultural organizations that must harmonize divergent value systems, leadership styles, and performance expectations. It is within this context that examining the role of cultural fit becomes not only relevant but essential for understanding SJV outcomes in China’s dynamic automotive sector.

2.3 Performance

2.3.1 Defining performance

In international joint venture (IJV) research, performance has emerged as a multidimensional construct encompassing both objective and subjective elements. Financial metrics such as return on investment (ROI), revenue growth, and market share have long been used as baseline indicators of venture success. However, recent literature increasingly recognizes the limitations of purely financial assessment, particularly in cross-cultural contexts like SJVs in China. Researchers argue that the integration process, managerial satisfaction, strategic alignment, and learning outcomes are equally vital in capturing the nuanced reality of joint venture operations (Ali et al., 2021). Subjective indicators such as trust between partners, quality of communication, perceived fairness in decision-making, and cultural compatibility are now understood as essential dimensions of performance, especially in environments marked by institutional ambiguity and high relational interdependence. These soft dimensions influence the venture’s resilience to conflict, adaptability to market shifts, and capacity for long-term collaboration. According to Zhao & Stiles (2023), ventures with high relational cohesion tend to demonstrate stronger performance sustainability than those focused solely on financial returns. In high-context cultures like China, where interpersonal harmony and mutual face-saving are valued, these non-financial performance indicators take on heightened significance (Konara & Mohr, 2023).

2.3.2 Defining the Sino-foreign Joint Venture Performance

Within the context of SJVs, performance must be interpreted through the lens of both partners' expectations and cultural frameworks. Empirical studies show that SJV performance is determined not only by output efficiency but also by how well partners can navigate differences in institutional logic, organizational practices, and leadership values (Yilmaz, 2020). In automotive SJVs, where operational success depends on synchronized timelines, standardized quality, and responsive product development, the ability to build shared routines and relational capital is pivotal.

Relational mechanisms such as mutual respect, shared decision-making protocols, and aligned long-term goals serve as mediators between cultural compatibility and performance outcomes. SJVs that institutionalize these mechanisms often achieve greater innovation output, enhanced supply chain coordination, and smoother adaptation to regulatory shifts (Wang et al., 2022). Moreover, Li (2022) demonstrate that cultural cohesion significantly predicts performance in dimensions like product localization, talent integration, and brand legitimacy.

Recent research also suggests that cultural fit enables effective joint learning, a process by which partners co-develop capabilities that neither could have achieved alone. This learning-based view of performance extends beyond current output to future potential, making cultural alignment a strategic asset rather than a mere soft factor. In sum, the performance of SJVs in China's automotive industry is best evaluated as a composite of financial returns, strategic adaptability, and relational quality, all of which are influenced by the degree of cultural fit.

2.4 Cultural Fit

Cultural fit in the context of international joint ventures (IJVs) refers to the extent to which the partnering firms share compatible values, norms, and managerial styles that facilitate mutual understanding and coordinated action. Within the Chinese institutional and cultural environment, this concept becomes particularly salient due to the stark contrast between Chinese collectivist, hierarchical traditions and the more individualistic, egalitarian frameworks typical of many Western partners (Fengyang, 2023).

Recent literature has highlighted that cultural fit is not a static condition but an ongoing process shaped by continuous interaction, negotiation, and adaptation. Kim et al. (2021) suggest that cultural alignment fosters psychological safety and relational trust, which are essential for joint decision-making and conflict mitigation. In environments where ambiguity and rapid change prevail, such as China's dynamic auto sector, these relational factors directly influence venture resilience and responsiveness.

The operational impact of cultural fit is increasingly supported by empirical studies. Feng and Liu (2023) found that SJVs characterized by high cultural alignment reported lower rates of employee turnover, more efficient dispute resolution, and stronger integration across functional teams. These benefits extend to external stakeholder interactions as well, with culturally congruent ventures perceived as more legitimate and reliable by suppliers, regulators, and customers alike.

Moreover, cultural fit plays a central role in shaping knowledge-sharing behaviours and joint learning capabilities. When partners perceive cultural similarities or develop mutual cultural understanding, they are more likely to share proprietary knowledge and collaborate on high-uncertainty projects, such as R&D and innovation efforts (Chang et al., 2020). This is especially pertinent in the automotive industry, where product customization, digital transformation, and green technology development require close cross-cultural coordination.

Importantly, research has also emphasized the moderating role of managerial tools in enhancing perceived cultural fit. Cross-cultural training programs, the use of bicultural intermediaries, and the integration of digital communication platforms can all help bridge gaps in expectations and interactional styles (Hwang, 2024). These interventions have proven effective in reducing friction during early-stage collaboration and in supporting long-term joint venture sustainability.

In sum, cultural fit in SJVs operates as both a structural and dynamic variable, one that influences not only the internal functioning of the venture but also its strategic positioning and innovation potential in the broader Chinese market. Understanding and managing cultural fit is thus essential for optimizing joint venture performance in the automobile sector and beyond.

2.5 Cultural Fit Theory

Cultural Fit Theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding how alignment between the cultural attributes of organizations enhances functional compatibility and cooperative outcomes. The theory posits that when entities share similar underlying cultural assumptions, such as attitudes toward hierarchy, time orientation, uncertainty, and individual responsibility, they are more likely to collaborate effectively and sustainably (Lu et al., 2023). This framework is especially relevant in joint venture contexts, where differing national and organizational cultures must converge to form coherent operational systems.

Within SJVs in China's automotive industry, Cultural Fit Theory offers a useful lens for explaining how congruence in managerial values, communication styles, and decision-making protocols facilitates integration. For instance, compatibility in leadership expectations, such as consensus-seeking versus directive leadership, can prevent miscommunication and power struggles, ultimately fostering smoother collaboration (Tsai & Qiao, 2023). Similarly, when foreign and Chinese partners demonstrate similar approaches to conflict resolution or long-term planning, they can co-create governance structures that support aligned objectives and reduce the need for costly formal controls.

Recent studies reinforce the theory's applicability by linking cultural fit with relational governance mechanisms. Relational governance refers to the informal coordination tools based on trust, reciprocity, and shared norms. Zhang (2024) observed that in electric vehicle joint ventures in China, cultural congruence enabled partners to respond more quickly to regulatory and market changes, underscoring the theory's predictive utility in dynamic environments.

Importantly, Cultural Fit Theory underscores that alignment is not necessarily rooted in cultural sameness but in the perceived compatibility of core values and behavioral expectations. This flexibility allows for strategic complementarities between partners, provided there is mutual recognition and adaptation. In other words, even when differences exist, shared frames of reference can create a sense of psychological alignment that sustains cooperation (Wang et al., 2022).

In sum, Cultural Fit Theory is highly pertinent to the study of SJV performance in China's automobile sector. It not only clarifies why some partnerships thrive despite institutional complexity, but also illuminates the behavioral pathways, such as trust-building and coordinated learning, through which cultural alignment translates into superior outcomes.

2.6 Research Hypothesis

H1: Cultural fit has a significant effect on the SJVP of the automobile industry in China.

3. Methodology and Data Collection

This study employs a positivist philosophical paradigm and a quantitative methodological framework to examine the hypothesized relationship between cultural fit and SJV performance. A deductive research approach was adopted, allowing theory-driven hypotheses to be tested with empirical data collected from a specific population (Casula et al., 2020). A cross-sectional design was implemented, capturing a snapshot of organizational dynamics during the 2023 fiscal year. The research sample consisted of 384 senior and mid-level managers from Chinese-foreign automobile joint ventures, selected through purposive sampling. These participants were chosen for their direct involvement in cross-cultural managerial coordination and decision-making. The survey instrument was a self-administered questionnaire designed with items adapted from established scales on cultural fit and joint venture performance (Kim et al., 2021). A pre-test with a small group of respondents ensured face validity and helped refine item clarity.

Central to the study's analytic strategy was the use of covariance-based structural equation modeling (CBSEM), conducted with SPSS and AMOS software. CBSEM was selected due to its strengths in estimating complex causal relationships among latent constructs, particularly when constructs are interrelated and measured through multiple indicators. Unlike regression techniques that assess direct associations between observed variables, CBSEM allows for simultaneous evaluation of measurement models and structural paths, enhancing the internal validity of the theoretical framework (Afthanorhan et al., 2021).

CBSEM was also essential for addressing measurement error, which is a critical concern in perceptual survey research. The analysis proceeded in two phases: (1) validation of the measurement model through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and (2) testing of the hypothesized structural relationships. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), while convergent validity was confirmed via average variance extracted (AVE). Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and inter-construct correlations. To determine the overall model fit, multiple indices were employed: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the chi-square statistic normalized by degrees of freedom (χ^2/df). The methodology ensured both the robustness of the measurement model, confirmed through CFA, reliability, and validity tests, and the empirical rigor of the structural model. By integrating a comprehensive set of fit indices and diagnostic criteria, the analytical approach strengthened the validity and reliability of findings, offering a solid foundation for theory testing and interpretation.

4. Results

Table 4.1 presents the outcome of the structural equation modeling analysis for the hypothesized path between cultural fit (CF) and Sino-foreign Joint Venture Performance (SJVP). The standardized path coefficient of 0.750 indicates a strong positive relationship, suggesting that as perceived cultural fit increases, SJV performance improves substantially. The p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.001$) demonstrates that this relationship is statistically significant. Additionally, the t-value of 17.257 confirms the stability and robustness of the effect. These results empirically validate Hypothesis 1 (H1), supporting the proposition that cultural fit is a key driver of joint venture success in the Chinese automobile industry. A standardized estimate of 0.750 implies that cultural fit accounts for a considerable portion of the variance in performance outcomes, highlighting its strategic importance.

This relationship reflects the pivotal role of shared cultural values, communication norms, and managerial alignment in achieving effective coordination, reduced friction, and improved collaborative outcomes within SJVs.

Table 4.1: Results

Hypothesized path	Expected direction	Standardized estimation	P-value	t-value	Result
H1: CF → SJVP	+	0.750***	0.000	17.257	Supported

Note: SF - strategic fit, SJVP - Sino-foreign Joint Venture Performance *** $p < 0.001$, ^{ns}not significant

5. Discussions

Much research has explored the role of strategic fit, organizational capabilities, and market orientation in joint venture performance; however, limited attention has been paid to how cultural fit specifically influences performance in the context of the Chinese automobile industry. Prior studies have noted the relevance of cultural dimensions, but the relational and behavioral mechanisms through which cultural fit affects outcomes remain underexamined. Recognizing this theoretical gap, the current study proposed that H1: Cultural fit has a significant effect on the Sino-foreign joint venture performance in the Chinese automobile industry.

The findings of this study strongly support the hypothesis. The observed standardized coefficient of 0.750 suggests that cultural fit plays a substantial and direct role in enhancing joint venture outcomes. This is consistent with previous research by Konara & Mohr (2023) and Chi & Gao (2024), who emphasized that shared cultural values facilitate trust, adaptive behavior, and informal governance mechanisms. These elements are especially critical in the Chinese context, where high-context communication and long-term orientation dominate interorganizational relations.

In line with the findings of Liu et al. (2020) and Pauluzzo & Cagnina (2019) this study confirms that ventures with higher cultural fit report improved capabilities in proactive problem-solving, knowledge sharing, and human resource stability. Notably, this research extends prior conclusions by demonstrating that cultural fit surpasses other structural determinants, such as equity distribution or formal governance structures, in predicting operational performance. This reinforces the growing recognition that soft relational capabilities are essential in environments marked by institutional complexity and intercultural variance.

Moreover, the results suggest that cultural fit not only fosters trust and cooperation but also enhances organizational learning and strategic flexibility, two elements that are vital for sustained competitiveness in the dynamic and innovation-driven automobile sector. The ability of culturally aligned ventures to respond swiftly to regulatory changes, market shifts, and technological developments likely explains their superior performance metrics. These findings are further supported by recent empirical research highlighting how cross-cultural competence contributes to joint venture resilience in uncertain environments (Pérez-Temprano et al., 2024).

In conclusion, this empirical evidence supports the theoretical proposition and aligns with recent shifts in literature toward valuing cultural and relational capabilities as core performance drivers in international business alliances.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study contributes to the growing body of literature affirming the centrality of cultural fit in determining the success of Sino-foreign joint ventures, especially within the high-stakes, fast-moving automotive industry. The research confirms that cultural alignment enhances trust, communication, and strategic coherence, leading to improved performance outcomes. Practitioners are advised to integrate cultural assessment tools in the joint venture lifecycle, from screening and negotiation to implementation and governance.

For policymakers, the findings suggest a need to support frameworks that encourage cross-cultural training and institutional trust-building. As China continues to liberalize its markets and encourage foreign collaboration, the ability of firms to manage cultural integration will increasingly distinguish successful ventures from underperforming ones. Future research may explore longitudinal effects of cultural fit and investigate mediating factors such as leadership style or digital coordination tools.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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