

*Original Paper*

A Study on the Synergistic Mechanism between Sino-Foreign  
Cooperative Education and the “Double First-Class”  
Construction—Based on the Practical Exploration of a College  
in Guangdong Province

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**Abstract**

*Under the national “Double First-Class” strategy and the goal of building a strong educational nation, Sino-foreign cooperative education has become an important approach to internationalizing higher education. A key question now is how such cooperative education programs can align with the “Double First-Class” initiative to achieve synergistic effects. Based on over two decades of Sino-foreign cooperative education practice at a college in Guangdong Province, this study adopts synergy theory to build a theoretical framework for the coordinated development of such programs and the “Double First-Class” initiative. From the perspectives of talent cultivation internationalization, faculty development, and disciplinary competitiveness, it analyzes the internal mechanisms of their synergistic evolution. The results show that Sino-foreign cooperative education enhances students’ global competitiveness through an “internationalization-at-home” model, optimizes the international structure of the faculty by combining external recruitment and internal training, and promotes interdisciplinary integration and connotative development via two-way resource interaction. This paper puts forward three synergy mechanisms: strategic coupling, resource sharing, and quality assurance. It also explores optimization paths in institutional construction, resource integration, and model innovation, aiming to provide theoretical and practical references for similar institutions to deepen the integration of international education and “Double First-Class” construction.*

**Keywords**

*Sino-foreign cooperative education, Double First-Class construction, synergistic mechanism, internationalization at home, high-quality development*

## 1. Introduction

The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly states that China will build a strong educational nation by 2035. It is the first time that an independent chapter is used to deploy the strategy of invigorating the country through science and education and strengthening talent support for modernization. In this context, the “Double First-Class” initiative is a national strategy to improve the quality and international competitiveness of China’s higher education, leading the connotative development of Chinese higher education. Meanwhile, Sino-foreign cooperative education is an important form of educational opening-up. It plays an irreplaceable role in introducing high-quality overseas educational resources and improving the level of internationalized education.

However, current academic research on the relationship between Sino-foreign cooperative education and the “Double First-Class” construction is still in its infancy. A keyword search for “Sino-foreign cooperative education” and “Double First-Class” on CNKI yields only 31 relevant articles, most of which focus on problem analysis and pathway exploration, lacking in-depth theoretical construction and empirical research on the synergistic mechanism between the two. Existing research has some shortcomings. First, most studies look at only one side of the issue. They do not fully explain how the two parts interact with each other. Second, there are many analyses of broad policies, but not enough research on the small-scale mechanisms. Third, there is a lack of deep case studies based on long-term, real-world practice in school operation.

Based on this, this paper takes a university in Guangdong Province (hereinafter referred to as “the College”) as a case study to systematically review its more than two decades of practical experience in Sino-foreign cooperative education since 2002, and to deeply explore the synergistic development mechanism between Sino-foreign cooperative education and the “Double First-Class” construction.

The College was one of the first in Guangdong Province to offer undergraduate-level Sino-foreign cooperative education. It has built partnerships with more than 170 well-known universities around the world. These partnerships have created a complete international education path.

This paper tries to answer three main questions:

First, what are the ways in which Sino-foreign cooperative education supports the “Double First-Class” construction?

Second, what is the inner logic behind their joint development?

Third, what are the best ways to improve it?

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Current Research

In recent years, there are more and more domestic studies about Sino-foreign cooperative education and the “Double First-Class” construction. Cheng et al. (2021), as well as Guo and Ye (2022) analyzed the real problems and difficulties that Sino-foreign cooperative education faces. They also offered specific strategies and pathways for innovative development. Wang and Guo (2023) took a different angle and

looked into the existing problems of Sino-foreign cooperative education in universities. Then Guo and Zhao (2024) built a competitiveness evaluation index system for Sino-foreign cooperative education within “Double First-Class” universities. It provides a useful tool for quantitative assessment. Chen et al. (2023) explored how to manage theoretical teaching in Sino-foreign cooperative education. And Wang et al. (2022) discussed how to build an evaluation index system as well.

Some researchers have explored the operation of integrated development. Wu et al. (2024) used externality theory as their basis, studied local universities and came up with three main mechanisms for integrating discipline construction with Sino-foreign cooperative education. They also identified two major development pathways. One leads toward world-class standards. The other leads toward high-level academic achievement. This work provides an important theoretical perspective for understanding the interaction between the two sides. Lin et al. (2024) explored both the strategic framework and the practical ways to carry it out. Their focus was on how Sino-foreign cooperative education can help raise the international influence of higher education.

Foreign researches tend to focus more on general topics in higher education internationalization. These topics include international academic cooperation, the movement of students and teachers across borders, global competitiveness, and international curriculum standards. However, there is not much research that looks specifically at how China’s “Double First-Class” construction relates to its Sino-foreign cooperative education. As the world’s most populous country, China’s experience in internationalizing education is worth looking into, which has both representativeness and broad applicability.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

This paper uses synergy theory and externality theory. It builds an analytical framework. The framework looks at how Sino-foreign cooperative education and the “Double First-Class” construction can develop together. Synergy theory helps explain how joint efforts create more value than working apart. Externality theory shows how benefits spill over—between institutions, disciplines, and national systems. Together, they form the backbone of the framework.

The framework has three main parts.

First, strategic goal synergy. Sino-foreign cooperative education supports China’s broader “Double First-Class” construction strategy. Both sides aim for the same things: better educational quality and stronger international competitiveness. Their goals line up closely.

Second, resource allocation synergy. They share resources to make up for each other’s gaps. Faculty move both ways—teachers from China go abroad, and foreign teachers come to China. Curricula get exchanged too. Academic resources—like research tools, data access, and lab facilities—are also shared back and forth. This kind of sharing builds real complementarity.

Third, institutional mechanism synergy. They set up a joint governance system. It’s built for integrated development. A quality assurance mechanism runs alongside it. Initially, it is presumed this structure would just formalize cooperation—but subsequent analysis revealed it actually shapes daily decision-making.

This paper also looks at how Sino-foreign cooperative education creates synergy. It focuses on three things. First, it boosts students' international competitiveness. Second, it helps faculty become more international. Third, it strengthens disciplinary competitiveness. Initially, it is presumed that these effects happen together—but closer inspection shows they feed into each other.

### **3. Empirical Analysis of the Synergistic Mechanism**

#### *3.1 Dual-Track Talent Training: Combining Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education with Internationalization at Home*

The College started its Sino-foreign cooperative education back in 2002. It launched a Bachelor of Commerce degree program with the College of Southern Queensland, Australia. That made it one of the first colleges in Guangdong Province to offer undergraduate-level Sino-foreign cooperative education. Later on, the College built more Sino-foreign cooperative education programs. It also set up international joint training programs. Over time, both the scale and the quality of its cooperative education have kept getting improved.

The College runs dual-degree programs. These programs require students to study abroad. Over the past three years, 69.4% of students in those programs went on to postgraduate study. That's the average progression rate. Half of those students—so about 34.7% overall—took up further study at universities ranked in the top 100 of the QS World University Rankings. Subsequent analysis revealed that students benefit a lot from the overseas exposure itself. They take on their own learning more actively. It's not just about grades. It's about how they adapt, build confidence, and shape their next steps—with actually practical support built into the program structure.

The College also set up Chinese-English bilingual innovation classes. These classes follow an “internationalization at home” strategy. Students get access to global teaching materials and learning experiences—right on campus. They don't need to go overseas for that. The mechanism of action works through what's called “three-dimensional integration.” First, there's curriculum system integration. He built this by weaving together professional courses from foreign partner institutions and the domestic curriculum system. That kept things up to international standards. At the same time, it made sure those courses actually fit local needs. Another thing worth mentioning is teaching method integration. He takes on his own version of interactive and seminar-based teaching models from abroad. These methods help students think more critically. They also push students to come up with new ideas. Then comes assessment method integration, in which evaluation systems are both diversified and process-oriented. It is revealed that this evaluation system captures learning in a much fuller way. They give a complete picture of student learning outcomes.

#### *3.2 Faculty Internationalization: Recruiting from Outside and Developing from Within*

Faculty internationalization matters a lot. It supports the “Double First-Class” construction directly. It's also a core advantage in Sino-foreign cooperative education. The College runs Sino-foreign cooperative education programs. In doing so, it built a dual-wheel driven mechanism. This mechanism focuses on

faculty internationalization. It mixes two main strategies. One is bringing in talent from abroad — that’s “external introduction.” The other is growing capability from within — that’s “internal cultivation.” These two paths reinforce each other and are tied together with actually practical coordination.

The College brings in outstanding faculty from foreign partner institutions. They teach through cooperative programs. The College also recruits high-level foreign teachers. It brings back returnees from around the world. Another thing worth mentioning: this external introduction isn’t just about filling positions. It’s meant to broaden classroom perspectives. These hires not only add teaching capacity, but also reshape curriculum dynamics. With actually practical impact, the mix of global expertise helps students connect ideas across contexts. And more than 90% of the full-time faculty in the College’s International College have studied abroad. That’s a big majority. They bring up-to-date knowledge and teaching ideas from overseas and also work closely with Chinese faculty through Chinese-foreign collaborative teaching models.

The College supports “internal cultivation” for young and mid-level faculty. It uses the cooperative education platform to create real chances for growth. These include overseas visiting studies, collaborative research, and international conference participation. These opportunities have broadened horizons, sharpened teaching skills and deepened subject expertise.

The College makes this possible with actually practical support. The Sino-foreign cooperative education teaching team project got second prize in 2019. It was a university-level teaching achievement award—specifically for Sino-foreign cooperative education. The language teaching team project for Sino-foreign cooperative education cleared final acceptance in 2020. That happened under the Guangdong Provincial Undergraduate University Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project. International education achievements took first prize in 2025. This was another university-level teaching achievement award. They really show how well the team-building efforts worked.

Sino-foreign cooperative education sets up a real-world space for international teaching exchange. It’s where “teaching scholarship” actually comes alive. Faculty internationalization used to mean bringing in ideas from abroad — that was mostly one-way, and movement abroad by individuals was common before. Today, the focus has shifted and it’s become mutual learning, with both sides sharing and growing together. This kind of steady, collective growth delivers ongoing human capital support. That support directly feeds into the “Double First-Class” construction.

### *3.3 Enhancing Disciplinary Competitiveness: Two-Way Resource Flow and Cross-Disciplinary Integration*

Sino-foreign cooperative education brings in high-quality international educational resources. It doesn’t just import them—it absorbs what fits, reshapes what’s needed, and pushes forward new ideas. It’s not just about moving things around. It’s about mixing knowledge from different fields. This dynamic process supports the “Double First-Class” construction in a deeper way. That kind of cross-disciplinary integration helps disciplines grow from within—not just in size, but in depth.

The College' practice shows how Sino-foreign cooperative education pushes disciplinary development forward. This happens mainly at three levels.

First up: bringing in curriculum resources. Then, adapting them locally. Schools work together with foreign partner institutions to build curriculum. They bring in internationally accepted disciplinary knowledge systems and teaching methods. Then they adapt those systems and methods to fit China's actual conditions. This process creates curriculum resources that have an international perspective. At the same time, these resources work well for Chinese students. Localization isn't just translation. It's about reshaping content so it sticks. Curriculum that's globally informed but locally grounded—with actually practical relevance.

Second, interdisciplinary cross-integration. Sino-foreign cooperative education often tears down old disciplinary walls. It pushes different fields to talk with each other—and to blend. Take the College's Internet Finance program. It brings finance and information technology together. That mix reflects where new liberal arts construction is headed. A curriculum is coherently connected.

Third, collaborative innovation in scientific research. The College uses its cooperative education platform. It works closely with foreign partner institutions on academic research. They've organized international conferences together. It's about mixing knowledge from different fields to solve actual problems. Several collaborative research projects are now underway. Academic output has gone up as a result. And in September 2023, the College attended the 29th Guangdong-New South Wales Joint Economic Conference. It was there as a representative of educational cooperation. International cooperation clearly boosted the College's academic reputation.

#### **4. Making Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education and “Double First-Class” Work Together**

##### *4.1 Effective Synergy*

###### *4.1.1 Goal Alignment and Pathway Synergy*

Sino-foreign cooperative education and the “Double First-Class” construction are aligned at the top-level design level in terms of goals and pathways. The College makes internationalized education part of its big-picture development strategy and branding goals. It makes clear that Sino-foreign cooperative education should serve the “Double First-Class” construction. This creates a healthy cycle. On one hand, internationalization helps push forward connotative development. On the other hand, connotative development gives back by supporting internationalization. When formulating disciplinary development plans, the College takes cooperative education programs as a breakthrough for disciplinary internationalization; when allocating resources, it gives priority to cooperative projects highly relevant to the “Double First-Class” construction; when evaluating performance, it takes the contribution of cooperative education to disciplinary construction as an important evaluation indicator.

###### *4.1.2 Two-Way Sharing of Resources*

Under the resource sharing mechanism, two-way flow and optimal allocation of resources are achieved between Sino-foreign cooperative education and disciplinary construction. On the one hand, the high-

quality faculty, research achievements, and teaching resources of disciplinary construction provide connotative support for cooperative education; on the other hand, the international curricula, foreign faculty, and international cooperation channels introduced through cooperative education inject international elements into disciplinary construction. This resource sharing is reflected not only in tangible resources (such as faculty, curricula, and equipment) but also in intangible resources (such as international reputation, academic networks, and organizational culture). The regular holding of Sino-foreign teaching salons and Chinese-foreign collaborative teaching at the College represents the concrete manifestation of the sharing mechanism at the organizational level.

#### 4.1.3 Whole-Process Quality Assurance

The quality assurance mechanism serves as the bottom-line guarantee for the synergistic development of Sino-foreign cooperative education and the “Double First-Class” construction. Through long-term practice, the College has gradually established a whole-process quality assurance system covering input, process, and output. The College looks at three stages: input, process, and output. At the input stage, it carefully checks all partner institutions and the resources they bring in. Only those that meet the needs of the “Double First-Class” construction are accepted. At the process stage, the College sets up a teaching supervision system. Both Chinese and foreign sides take part in this system. Students also get to evaluate their teachers. Regular checks are done on teaching quality. At the output stage, the College tracks how graduates develop after leaving school. The main indicator for quality evaluation is how competitive students are on an international level. This mechanism is internally consistent with the competitiveness evaluation index system constructed by Guo Qiang et al. (2024).

### 4.2 Optimization Pathways and Practice

#### 4.2.1 Establishing a Coordination, Incentive, and Constraint Mechanism

Build a governance system for the synergistic development of Sino-foreign cooperative education and the “Double First-Class” construction. Set up a solid coordination system at the College level. Departmental walls need to come down. Cooperative education management and disciplinary construction management should connect in a natural, living way. At the same time, policy incentives need a refresh. Constraints also need tightening. Cooperative education’s role in disciplinary construction should count—really count—in how departments are evaluated. It should shape how resources get handed out.

#### 4.2.2 Resource Management

The College could build a complete chain for bringing in high-quality international education resources. This chain covers three steps: introduction, local adaptation, and innovation. Instead of just taking in projects as they are, the College needs to move toward deep, integrated development. The focus should be on making introduced resources fit the local context and turning them into something new.

Set up a resource sharing system. This system links Sino-foreign cooperative education programs with disciplinary platforms. It helps curriculum resources, faculty resources, and academic resources move more smoothly across the College.

#### 4.2.3 Pathway Innovation

The College keeps looking for new ways to grow. It wants its development to be both diverse and unique. It builds on what the College does best—its educational focus and subject strengths. That’s how it tested out several different paths forward. One path puts disciplines front and center. Another doubles down on existing strengths. A third focuses on swapping resources across departments or institutions. It’s already running some joint programs. Those are now being strengthened. At the same time, the College is pushing into master’s-level cooperative education. This move wasn’t just about adding more courses. It was about lifting cooperative education up—to match higher academic standards. Design adjustments for the master’s level would be needed.

Overall, the College’s practical experience offers some useful takeaways for similar institutions. First, building up Sino-foreign cooperative education alongside the “Double First-Class” construction takes time. It needs steady effort and long-term investment. Quick wins shouldn’t be the goal. Second, real synergistic development isn’t about stacking things on top of each other. It’s about deep integration. He takes on his own—what matters is turning international resources into something homegrown. That shift fuels connotative disciplinary development from within. Third, quality can’t be compromised. It’s the lifeline here. A scientific evaluation system has to be in place. There also needs to be a way to keep improving—not just once, but continuously. It is no doubt that sustained quality control makes all the difference.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper draws on more than twenty years of hands-on experience. The work happens at a university in Guangdong Province. It focuses on Sino-foreign cooperative education. Synergy theory is used here—not as a distant concept, but as a practical lens. The analytical framework looks at how Sino-foreign cooperative education and the “Double First-Class” construction can grow together. That practice feeds directly into the theory-building part. The paper then lays out concrete optimization pathways. It is hoped that other colleges or universities facing similar challenges may find the value of the practice of the College.

Looking ahead, it would be suggested that future research can take several directions. One is to do comparative studies involving multiple cases. Another is to use quantitative methods. These approaches can help explore how different types of universities might follow different development paths.

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