Students' perceptions of integrating culture into Chinese language learning: A case study at a Thai university

การรับรู้ของนักศึกษาต่อการบูรณาการวัฒนธรรมในการเรียนภาษาจีน: กรณีศึกษาในมหาวิทยาลัยในประเทศไทย

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Abstract

This study investigates Thai undergraduate students' perceptions of integrating cultural elements into Chinese language learning. Despite the growing trend of learning Chinese in Thailand, little is known about how students value cultural integration alongside linguistic skills. Using Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) framework, the research employed a mixed-methods design. Data were collected from 85 fourth-year students through a validated questionnaire combining Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate that students strongly value cultural integration, especially in areas of daily life, festivals, and social norms, as these enhance engagement and intercultural communication. However, challenges such as an uneven balance of cultural content and implementation issues were also reported. The study contributes to curriculum development in Chinese language education, emphasizing that culture is not supplementary but fundamental to achieving communication competence.

Keywords: Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Cultural integration in language learning, Thai undergraduate students, Learner perceptions, Student-centered approach

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งสำรวจการรับรู้ของนักศึกษาปริญญาตรีชาวไทยต่อการบูรณาการองค์ประกอบทางวัฒนธรรมเข้ากับการเรียนภาษาจีน แม้ว่าแนวโน้มการเรียนภาษาจีนในประเทศไทยจะเติบโตขึ้นอย่างต่อเนื่อง แต่การศึกษาว่านักศึกษาให้คุณค่ากับการบูรณาการวัฒนธรรม ควบคู่ไปกับการพัฒนาทักษะทางภาษาอย่างไรนั้นยังมีอยู่อย่างจำกัด งานวิจัยนี้ใช้กรอบแนวคิดสมรรถนะการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรม (Intercultural Communicative Competence: ICC) ของ Byram (1997) โดยใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยแบบผสมผสาน ข้อมูลของงานวิจัยนี้ถูกเก็บรวบรวมจากนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 4 จำนวน 85 คน ผ่านแบบสอบถาม ซึ่งประกอบด้วยคำถามแบบ Likert-scale และคำถามปลายเปิด และวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณด้วยสถิติเชิงพรรณนา ส่วนข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพใช้วิธีการวิเคราะห์เชิงธีม (thematic analysis) ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่านักศึกษาให้ความสำคัญกับการบูรณาการวัฒนธรรมในระดับสูง โดยเฉพาะในด้านชีวิตประจำวัน เทศกาล และบรรทัดฐานทางสังคม ซึ่งช่วยส่งเสริมการมีส่วนร่วมและการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรม อย่างไรก็ตาม ยังพบความท้าทายบางประการ เช่น ความไม่สมดุลของเนื้อหาทางวัฒนธรรม และปัญหาด้านการนำไปปฏิบัติ งานวิจัยนี้มีส่วนช่วยในการพัฒนาหลักสูตรการเรียนการสอนภาษาจีน โดยเน้นว่าวัฒนธรรมไม่ใช่เพียงส่วนเสริม แต่เป็นพื้นฐานสำคัญในการบรรลุสมรรถนะในการสื่อสารอย่างแท้จริง

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาจีนในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ สมรรถนะการสื่อสารระหว่างวัฒนธรรม การบูรณาการวัฒนธรรมในการเรียนภาษา นักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรีชาวไทย การรับรู้ของผู้เรียน การจัดการเรียนรู้ที่เน้นผู้เรียนเป็นสำคัญ

Introduction

Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language is growing in popularity worldwide. Chinese language education has been provided for more than 20 years in Thailand, with increasing learners and a wide range of courses. Many universities have offered highly specialized Chinese language courses, such as Chinese for Traditional Chinese Medicine and Chinese for Business Management, to help students communicate in their future work. In actual practice, students still have difficulties, such as communicating with native speakers, even after a period of study. For example, Chinese people would say, "Have you eaten yet?" instead of "Hello!" when greeting someone. If students do not understand these cultural aspects, they may fail to communicate. This raises a question: Are Thai CFL classrooms developing students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC)? ICC refers to the ability to communicate with people by understanding the interactants' cultures.

This research aims to investigate whether integrating culture into Chinese learning can improve Thai undergraduate students' intercultural communicative competence. The research questions were as follows:

(1) What are Thai undergraduate students' perceptions of integrating culture into Chinese learning?

(2) Which aspects of Chinese culture are Thai undergraduate students interested in learning?

Aligning with the research questions, there are two research objectives:

(1) To explore Thai undergraduate students' perceptions of integrating culture into Chinese learning.

(2) To identify the aspects of Chinese culture that Thai undergraduate students are interested in learning.

This study provides practical implementation advice for Chinese teachers on integrating cultural content into language learning. Understanding students' interests and experiences helps teachers develop more effective teaching materials and shift from a teacher-centered approach to an interactive student-centered one. It also provides suggestions for institutions in designing an effective culturally integrating CLF curriculum.

Literature Review

Intercultural Communicative Competence

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is a framework that aims to develop language skills and cultural understanding. It was first proposed by Byram in 1997. ICC consists of the following five dimensions:

(1) Attitudes of openness, curiosity, and empathy toward other cultures.

(2) Knowledge about social groups, cultures, and intercultural processes in one's own and other countries.

(3) Skills of interpreting and relating cultural documents or events.

(4) Skills of discovery and interaction: Ability to acquire new cultural knowledge and apply it in real-time communication.

(5) Critical cultural awareness: Ability to evaluate perspectives, practices, and products critically based on explicit criteria.

Later, Byram et al. (2013) revealed that foreign language learning focused more on intercultural communication than traditional grammatical learning. The research also indicated that learners can only use language by understanding the related culture. In 2021, Byram reaffirmed the importance of ICC in education and explained some issues related to language teaching and assessment (Byram, 2021).

The framework in this research is developed based on the ICC framework. This model has been chosen because the researcher believes that it is important for students to develop their intercultural communication competence, and it has also been proven effective in Thailand. Snodin (2015), as well as Phongsirikul and Thongrin (2019), adapted Byram's model for English language teaching. Both studies focused on the role of everyday culture, and their findings suggested that learning everyday culture could enhance student engagement and communication skills. They also pointed out that there are some challenges in integrating culture into English learning. Unlike these two studies (Phongsirikul & Thongrin, 2019; Snodin, 2015), which focus on English intercultural communication competence, this research focuses on Chinese intercultural communication competence.

Cultural integration in language learning

Before exploring current cultural integration, it is necessary to review the relationship between language and culture. The relationship has been discussed by many researchers for a long time. Some scholars argued that they are inseparable (Agar, 1995; Halliday, 1979; Moran, 2001). They viewed language either as a tool of culture or as a product of culture. Other scholars proposed a more separable view. They suggested that learning a language does not require learning the culture simultaneously (Bakhtin, 1986; Kramsch, 1993; Risager, 2007). Although there are many discussions, many studies have supported the integration of culture into language learning. Brown (2000) stressed that cultural understanding is important to communication competence. Gardner (2010) highlighted that attitudes toward the related culture improve learners' motivation and achievement. Liu (2009) argued that integrating

cultural elements improves learners' learning outcomes. Pourkalhor and Esfandiari (2017), as well as Iswandari and Ardi (2022), highlighted the necessity of integrating cultural content into language learning.

As for Chinese language learning, recent research supported integrating cultural elements into Chinese language learning (Dong et al., 2025; Ma et al., 2024; Wang & Jitrabiab, 2025; Xiao & Tian, 2024), and all of them agreed on the benefits of cultural integration for language learning in terms of communicating with foreigners, motivation to learn a foreign language, and intercultural awareness. But these studies also revealed several challenges. Wang and Jitrabiab (2025), as well as Xian and Tian (2024), investigated influencing factors and challenges in Chinese teaching and learning in Thailand. Both studies suggested cultural integration as a possible method to solve these issues. Xiao and Tian (2024) additionally emphasized the necessity of moderate integration, as difficult content may bring negative impacts. Ma et al. (2024) suggested that teachers need to reconsider the relationship between language and culture, as culture is not a secondary element of language. The significance of teachers' appropriate instructional guidance, particularly when introducing specific cultural concepts, has been highlighted by Dong et al. (2025). Their research also identified digital platforms as useful resources for language learning, especially for listening skills and intercultural understanding.

The existing research focuses on the factors and challenges of cultural integration from the teachers' perspective, and few have discussed what to integrate and how to do it, particularly from the students' perspectives. This research aims to explore students' perceptions of integrating culture into Chinese learning and then identify cultural content that students are interested in. Culture is the shared experience of a group of people, which includes their general beliefs and customs. It is often divided into two categories: the Big C culture and the Small C culture. The broad definition, often referred to as Big C culture, encompasses the visible elements and achievements of a society, including traditional festivals, historical events, and artistic achievements. The narrow definition, known as Small C culture, relates to everyday life, such as people's working styles, eating habits, and interpersonal relationships. This study includes both Big C and Small C culture aspects as it aims to identify which cultural elements are more popular among students.

Student-centered approach In the Thai Context

This study was conducted from the students' perspective because the student-centered approach is becoming popular as it is considered more effective in enhancing student motivation. It allows students to decide what they want to learn and how they learn. In Thailand, a growing number of studies support student-centered approaches. Thongmak (2019) indicated that the student-centered approach has become more popular in Thailand as it connects students' interests with learning content. Tandamrong and Parr (2022) proved the successful implementation of a student-centered approach at the university level, a finding consistent with the earlier research of Treesuwan and Tanitteerapan (2016). As the student-centered approach emphasizes student initiative and participation, it has become more popular than the traditional teacher-centered approach. Research by both Duangmanee and Waluyo (2023) and Graham (2021) confirmed that students prefer active learning such as role-playing and group discussions. On the other hand, these studies (Duangmanee & Waluyo, 2023; Graham,2021; Tandamrong & Parr, 2022) focused on teachers, exploring actual teaching methods from their perspective.

In practice, implementing a student-centered approach has encountered some challenges. Namwong (2020) indicated that Thai classrooms remain teacher-centered, although the student-centered approach has been officially advised. The results also indicated that the challenges included a traditional exam-oriented system, large class sizes, and a limited understanding of student-centered methods. Additional challenges have been identified by Liu (2022), and the challenges include insufficient classroom practice and a lack of teaching materials. Graham (2021) argued that the successful implementation of student-centered methods requires adapting them to the local culture and actual teaching conditions, while Payaporm and Payaporm (2020) suggested that it is important to understand students' diverse learning styles.

Similar challenges exist in teaching Chinese in Thailand. Wei and Weerasawainon (2019) found that the learning content, particularly in terms of cultural knowledge and practical application, failed to meet students' needs. They proposed that learners' needs and preferences should be considered when compiling Chinese textbooks. Qu (2025) also suggested that promoting a student-centered approach as a solution to improve the quality

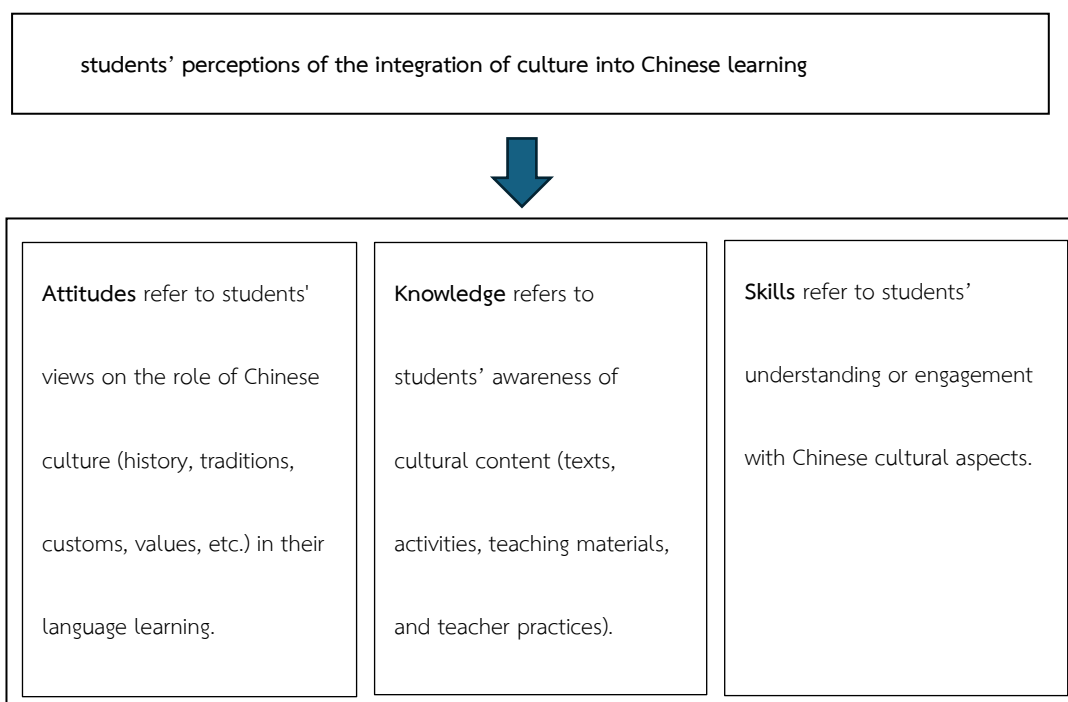of Chinese language teaching after analyzing the factors and challenges.

Methodology

The Scope of the Study

This study examines Thai undergraduate students' perceptions of integrating culture into Chinese learning in Thailand, focusing on three key dimensions adapted from Byram's (1997) ICC framework: attitudes, knowledge, and skills. It also aims to identify students' interest in specific cultural aspects. The research was conducted at a public university in Bangkok in the 2025 academic year, using a Student Perception Questionnaire combining quantitative and qualitative items. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed using data-driven thematic analysis. The findings of this research are limited to this specific context.

Research Framework

The research framework of the study is developed based on Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997).

Research Context

The context of this study is an international program titled Language for Careers (LCI) at a university in Bangkok, Thailand. The program aims to develop students' intercultural communication skills and professional skills. Students have the opportunity to learn a third language from year 2 to year 4. Some of these students had never studied Chinese before university. There are approximately 250 students currently enrolled in the program, and they are learning Chinese.

Students first complete the foundational Chinese language courses, namely Chinese for communication. They then proceed to professional courses, namely Chinese for Business and Chinese for Hospitality. In their final academic year, they also take a course on Chinese culture. The Chinese for communication courses emphasize developing students' communication skills. The textbooks for these courses are *360 Standard Sentences in Chinese Conversations 1,2, and 3*. The primary purpose is to teach students to communicate appropriately with Chinese people by learning pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. As for the cultural courses, the two main reference textbooks are *An overview of Chinese culture* and *A glimpse of Chinese culture*. In addition, the lecturer prepared designed materials according to the theme.

Research Participants

The population of this study consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in the program learning Chinese as a foreign language. A convenience sample of 85 fourth-year students was selected. The participants were selected based on the following two criteria: (1) they were the only students simultaneously taking a Chinese language course and a culture course; (2) most of them had experience communicating with Chinese people through voluntary events and part-time job experience. This selection ensured that all participants had direct experience to assess the impact of cultural elements on their learning. For example, some Thai students considered that Chinese people were unwelcoming as they did not smile, so they were afraid to talk to Chinese people. In fact, although Chinese people do not smile at strangers, most foreigners will find that Chinese people are very friendly after more contact. If students understand these cultural aspects, they will not be nervous or afraid to speak, especially at the first-time meeting. And these cultural aspects are only emphasized in senior

year cultural courses, so these students can truly experience how cultural understanding helps their communication skills.

Research Instruments

The instrument was a Student Perception Questionnaire, adapted from previous research. The questionnaire items were selected and then modified to fit the research context and objectives. The adaptation process involved rewriting some questions to align with this study. There are four parts in the questionnaire: demographic information, perceptions of cultural integration, evaluation of cultural content, and two open-ended questions. Validity was confirmed through pilot testing with 15 students, and reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's Alpha test of 0.879.

Part One is demographic information, including self-evaluation of Chinese proficiency, previous exposure to Chinese culture before university, and their main reasons for learning Chinese. Part Two explores the students' perceptions of integrating culture into Chinese through three aspects and their experience in the Chinese classes. Part Three is the evaluation of cultural content. In this part, students rate the specific cultural content. Part Four has two open-ended questions. Students can answer the questions either in English or in Thai. The two open-ended questions can provide additional details for data collection, and they allow students to freely share their own perspectives and experiences.

The questionnaire was distributed by the lecturer in the cultural course.

Data Analysis

The research questionnaire was addressed using both quantitative and qualitative data. All data were collected through a student questionnaire. Quantitative data were collected by closed-ended questions and analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequency, mean, and standard deviation. Qualitative data were collected by open-ended questions and analyzed using data-driven thematic analysis.

Results

This study received a total of 85 effective responses. Among them, there were 75 female students and 10 male students. All participants were enrolled in the LCI program, with 60% of the students reporting 4 years of Chinese language learning experience and 26% reporting 3 years. Over 60% of the students identified themselves as beginner (HSK 1-2), 38% as intermediate (HSK 3-4), and only one student as advanced (HSK 5-6). Around 38% of the students reported having little exposure to Chinese culture, 35% reported medium exposure, and 11% reported high exposure. Approximately 16% of the students have never been exposed to Chinese culture before college. The most common motivation for learning Chinese was career development (68%), followed by academic requirements (15%) and cognitive challenge (7%). Table 1 describes the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1

Demographic Description

Item 1: Gender

	Frequency	Percentage
Male	10	11.8
Female	75	88.2

Item 2: Major

	Frequency	Percentage
LCI	85	100

Item 3: Years of studying Chinese

	Frequency	Percentage
3 years	22	25.9
4 years	50	58.5
5 years	3	3.5
>5 years	10	11.8

Item 4: Current proficiency level in Chinese

	Frequency	Percentage
Beginner	52	61.2
Intermediate	32	37.6
Advanced	1	1.2

Item 5: Previous exposure to Chinese culture (before university)

	Frequency	Percentage
None	13	15.3
Minimal	33	38.8
Moderate	30	35.3
Extensive	9	10.6

Item 6: Main reason for learning Chinese (Please choose one reason)

	Frequency	Percentage
Academic requirement	13	15.3
Career advancement	57	67.1
Cultural appeal	3	3.5
Travel goals	4	4.7
Heritage connection	1	1.2
Cognitive challenge	6	7.1
Social connections	1	1.2

Research Question 1: What are Thai undergraduate students' perceptions of integrating culture into Chinese learning?

Quantitative Data

Participants were asked to answer 15 closed-ended questions, which aimed to explore the students' perceptions of integrating culture into Chinese through three aspects and their experience in the Chinese class. All questions in this part were 5-point Likert Scale questions and were coded as follows: 1 for Strongly Disagree, 2 for Disagree, 3 for Uncertain, 4 for Agree, and 5 for Strongly Agree.

The results were categorized into three main modules: attitudes, knowledge, and skills. The Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.879, suggesting good reliability and internal consistency among the questions. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

The Student Perception Questionnaire Results

Item	Statement	Mean	SD
Module One Attitudes		**3.73**	**.728**
7	It is essential to know about Chinese culture to learn the language effectively.	4.16	.829
8	Culture learning is as important as grammar and vocabulary.	3.94	.878
9	I am interested in Chinese culture because it's very different from other cultures.	3.65	.960
10	I am more interested in Chinese culture than in the language.	3.27	1.127
11	Cultural aspects (e.g. traditions, values, history) increase my motivation to learn Chinese.	3.61	.989
Module One Knowledge		**3.66**	**.448**
12	My Chinese teacher includes cultural elements in lessons (e.g. customs, festivals, history, etiquette).	4.31	.817
13	There is too much emphasis on language form (grammar and vocabulary) and not enough on culture.	3.13	.910
14	Limited exposure to authentic cultural materials (films, native speakers, cultural exchange) is a problem.	2.91	.921
15	I could easily find any information that I want to know about Chinese culture, such as social conventions, values, and lifestyles.	4.02	.786
16	Learning about cultural aspects helps me understand my own cultural identities.	3.92	.916
Module One Skills		**4.03**	**.653**
17	Learning some aspects of Chinese culture is challenging.	4.27	.746
18	Cultural knowledge makes language learning more enjoyable.	4.16	.857

19	Understanding Chinese culture helps me understand the language better.	4.09	.840
20	Cultural integration increases my confidence in using Chinese in a real context.	3.76	.934
21	Learning Chinese culture helps me communicate more appropriately with native speakers.	3.87	.973
All Modules		**3.81**	**.501**

Module One Attitudes: Participants showed a positive attitude towards integrating culture into Chinese learning, and most of them agreed that it is helpful for language learning (item 7: 4.16). Culture has been identified by participants as an important component of learning, the same as grammar and vocabulary (item 8: 3.94). Most students expressed a strong interest in learning culture (item 9: 3.65), to the same extent as their interest in learning the language itself (item 10: 3.27). Participants also indicated that various cultural aspects improved their learning motivation (item 11: 3.61).

Module Two Knowledge: Most students indicated that their Chinese teachers incorporated sufficient cultural elements into their classes (item 12: 4.31). Participants expressed neutral attitudes towards the distribution of cultural and language (item 13: 3.13), and they felt their exposure to cultural content was not enough (item 14: 2.91), although they could now quickly find relevant cultural content (item 15: 4.02). They also felt that cultural learning provided them with a better understanding of their own culture (item 16: 3.92).

Module Three Skills: The mean value for skill value was 4.03, the highest of the three modules, indicating that the students agree that cultural understanding helps improve their intercultural communication skills. Although some content can be challenging (item 17: 4.27), cultural integration makes language learning more enjoyable for students (item 18: 4.16). The benefits of learning culture for language learning from the student perspective include: helping them understand the language (item 19: 4.09); increasing their confidence in using Chinese (item 20: 3.76); and improving communication skills (item 21: 3.87).

The findings from all three modules examined the vital role of cultural integration in Chinese language education from the students' perspective. Culture has been perceived as an

essential component of learning, and cultural elements help language learning, particularly help students improve their understanding of the language and develop intercultural communication skills. Students reported that they have enough content from teachers and accessible resources, but they maintained a neutral attitude toward the distribution of cultural content and language learning. The data demonstrated that cultural integration boosts student motivation and enjoyment, helps them build confidence in communicating with Chinese people, and deepens their understanding of their own culture.

Qualitative Data

Participants were asked to answer one open-ended question, which was designed to explore students' experiences with culture in Chinese learning. Participants could answer the questions either in English or in Thai. A total of 48 responses were received, and 47 were answered in English.

After data collection, the researcher reviewed all the responses to gain a thorough overview. All text, including phrases and sentences, was highlighted, labeled, and then grouped to generate codes. These codes were subsequently developed into broader themes after several rounds of refining. This repeated coding process ensures the usefulness and accuracy of the themes. The themes were finally clearly defined with an appropriate title. Table 3 shows the themes generated based on the responses.

Table 3

Experience Theme

Code	Frequency	Theme
- Understand context - Understand people - Interpreting	19	Culture as a tool for understanding
- More interesting - More enjoyable - Love	15	Enhanced Engagement
- Confidence to use - Real situations - Communicate	9	Practical Confidence

- Give chance	6	Experiential Learning
- Give insight		
- Hard to memorize	5	Facing challenges
- Challenge for me		

Note. The total frequency is lower than the total number of responses as some participants opted not to answer the open-ended questions.

Student Perception

Student responses 1

'It helps **understand context**, expressions, and social etiquette, making **communication** more natural.'

Student responses 2

'Cultural context gives me **confidence to use** the language in **real situations**.'

Student responses 3

'I **enjoyed learning Chinese** culture because it helped me **understand the language** better and made the lessons **more interesting**.'

Student response 4

'...... This course gave me a lot of knowledge, helped me **understand** how Chinese **people** think, and how to **communicate** with them properly.

The qualitative results are consistent with the quantitative data. Students expressed that cultural understanding is an effective tool for language learning as it helps them understand the language usage in real life, and they also recognize its challenges, for example, some content was really difficult for them. Moreover, the qualitative data indicate that cultural integration provides students' experiential learning. Students stated that cultural elements enabled them to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese society and people, and such understanding could help involved in meaningful interactions with native speakers rather than simple conversations.

Research Question 2: Which aspects of Chinese culture are Thai undergraduate students interested in learning?

Quantitative Data

Participants were asked to rate their level of preference for each cultural aspect to identify student interest. The descriptors of the rating were 1 for Strongly Dislike, 2 for Dislike, 3 for Neutral, 4 for Like, and 5 for Strongly Like. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4

Culture Rating

Item	Cultural Aspect	Mean	SD
22	Chinese history	3.80	.897
23	Chinese geography	3.13	.985
24	Chinese families	3.74	.941
25	Chinese philosophers	3.22	.993
26	Chinese daily life	4.47	.781
27	Chinese traditional festivals	4.34	.795
28	Chinese myths and legends	4.08	.978
29	Chinese rites and customs	3.74	.978
30	Chinese traditional clothing	3.86	.966
	Content	3.82	.610

As shown in Table 4, the average means of seven themes, out of the nine themes provided in the questionnaire, were close to 4, which indicated that students were interested in Chinese culture. The data did not show any preference among students for Big C culture or small C culture. They were most interested in themes related to daily life (item 26: 4.47), traditional festivals (item 27: 4.34), and myths (item 28: 4.08), as only these three themes had an average score of over four. The themes that students are less interested in were geography and philosophy, as they had a neutral attitude towards Chinese geography (item 23: 3.13) and Chinese philosophers (item 25: 3.22). The average mean for these two topics is only close to three. In fact, these two topics may be too difficult for foreigners, even for Chinese people.

Qualitative Data

Participants were asked to answer one open-ended question to explore additional cultural themes of interest. Table 5 shows the theme generated from the 65 responses.

Table 5

Cultural Theme

Code	Frequency	Theme
- Social norms - Etiquette - Family values	21	Social Norms
- Daily habit - Modern life - Pop culture	19	Contemporary Daily Life
- Festivals - Traditional	15	Traditions and Festivals
- Myth - Literature	8	Literature and myth
- Food	7	Food
- Language - Grammar - Idiom	9	Language
- History - Dynasty	8	History

Note. The total frequency is lower than the total number of responses as some participants opted not to answer the open-ended questions.

Student Interest

Student response 1

'……Chinese learning should emphasize culture as much as language. Key aspects include **social etiquette** such as greetings and saving face……'

Student response 2

'……emphasize more about Chinese **trend and real life** in China, so when we go to China or interact with Chinese, we can connect more with the country and the people…….'

Student response 3

'…… Chinese learning should focus more on **traditions, festivals,** and **daily life**, because culture makes the language more meaning.'

Student response 4

'Chinese in **working life** like the conditions, how to make a network and connection with them, any **norms** that must be known.'

According to the student responses, the top three culture topics that they are most interested in were social norms, contemporary life, and festivals, which suggests that students pay more attention to Small C culture. Students expressed that these topics make language more interesting and more meaningful and help them learn how to communicate with Chinese people. They want to know how the Chinese get along with others, including etiquette, appropriate behavior, hierarchy, and social context. They focus on workplace culture, socialization, and current trends, as these topics prepare them for future work. Besides these Small C culture, students are still interested in Big C culture as they are considered representatives of China. The responses highlighted student interest in traditions and festivals. Other themes mentioned included literature, food, language, and history.

Both qualitative and quantitative data indicated that students are very interested in Chinese culture, especially interested in daily life and festivals, and the open-ended responses highlighted their particular interest in social norms, such as etiquette and family values.

Discussion

The findings in this research demonstrate that students consider culture as an inseparable element of language and that the cultural aspect helps improve their language skills. It provides new empirical evidence for the inseparable relationship between culture and language from the students' perspective, which supports earlier research such as Halliday

(1979), Agar (1995), and Moran (2001). Students described culture as an essential component of language and as an effective learning tool. They emphasize that culture is essential to language learning, supporting recent research (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Pourkalhor & Esfandiari, 2017). Students also agree that culture is as important as grammar and vocabulary, supporting Ma et al. (2024)'s finding that culture is a primary element in the learning process. The findings of this research could provide support for teachers to integrate cultural content into Chinese classes.

Another finding from this research indicates that students are interested in Chinese culture, both Big C and Small C culture. This finding extends the concept of culture in language learning. The results indicate that Big C Culture, such as traditional festivals, remains attractive to students. Meanwhile, students also demonstrate a strong need to learn about Small C culture. Their specific interest in 'modern practice in the workplace' and 'current trends' not only reveals a lack of contemporary everyday culture but also shows the need for a more balanced integration of Big C and Small C culture aspects. This presents challenges for teachers in designing courses and materials. Such challenges are consistent with the findings of Wei and Weerasawainon (2019). They reported that Chinese textbooks in Thailand should be revised using a student-centered approach as the current books fail to meet students' practical needs. Additionally, the cultural elements that students are most interested in have been identified in this research, and the contents include daily life, traditional festivals, and social norms. These cultural aspects could provide implementation guidance for designing Chinese language courses and materials.

Understanding what students want to learn is insufficient, and it is also important to know how they want to learn. An additional finding of this study is the inconsistency between instruction and practice. Students agreed that cultural content is valuable, and they felt the teacher had provided sufficient materials, but they also reported that they did not have enough practice. The reason for insufficient practice may be due to a lack of interactive activities that students prefer, particularly in large classes. It indicates that simply introducing cultural content is not enough and that successful integration requires adaptation to student interests and needs. The finding aligns with the challenges identified by Nanwong (2020) and Liu (2022) that traditional teacher-centered methods still dominate in Thailand. It also aligns

with the results from Qu (2025) and Graham (2021), that both student needs and local context should be considered using a student-centered approach. The findings of this research could guide teachers in designing classroom activities.

The purpose of this study is to investigate Thai undergraduate students' perceptions of integrating culture into Chinese language learning and to identify the specific cultural aspect they are most interested in. The findings provide evidence for the essential role of culture in the CFL classroom from the students' perspective. Additionally, this study extends the application of the ICC model in Thailand from English to Chinese language learning. While Snodin (2015) and Phongsirikul and Thongrin (2019) have demonstrated the benefits of cultural integration for English learners, this study confirms that the model is equally applicable to Chinese learners in the Thai context. The high mean scores across attitude, knowledge, and skills modules indicate that students have positive attitudes toward cultural integration. Students also acknowledge its practical benefits for enhancing language comprehension and communication skills during Chinese language learning. These findings align with the core objective of ICC, which is the appropriate use of language in intercultural communication. In addition, students show a willingness to learn practical communication skills, which is consistent with Byram (2013) that language learning is shifting from traditional grammatical instruction to the cultivation of communication skills. The results demonstrate that cultural understanding is essential for developing communication skills in Chinese, therefore supporting the integration of culture into language learning.

This study has several limitations. The sample was composed of students from one program, and the gender distribution was skewed (88% female), which limits the generalizability of the findings to other CFL classrooms in Thailand. Furthermore, the data in the questionnaire were self-reported, which may not fully reflect students' language levels and achievements. The use of a convenience sample also means the results are not representative of all Thai CFL learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research supports the inseparable relationship between culture and language from students' perspectives and the integration of culture into language learning,

which provides empirical support for Chinese language teachers to integrate cultural content in the classroom. This study also expands the concept of culture in language learning, indicating that culture should include traditional culture and various aspects of daily life. The results show that students are most interested in daily life and traditional festivals. The study also identified the cultural integration challenges, and successful cultural integration should consider students' interests and more interactive teaching methods. The researcher suggests that integrating culture into language learning with a student-centered approach in the CFL classroom, and the integration should consider students' preferred content and approach.

Future research could focus on designing teaching materials and interactive activities from the students' perspective and evaluating their effectiveness. It should expand to a broader sample across multiple programs and investigate the long-term impact of cultural exposure on language learning using more objective evaluation methods.

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