

How Chinese Teachers in Thai Public Vocational Colleges Perceive Cultural Teaching and Navigate Practical Dilemmas : A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Cultural teaching is widely recognised as central to communicative development in international Chinese language education, yet it remains difficult to sustain in Thailand's vocational colleges, where time, assessment visibility, and employability relevance shape what teachers can realistically do. This study interviewed 24 Chinese language teachers in Thai public vocational colleges using semi-structured in-depth interviews and a constructivist grounded theory approach. The findings show that cultural teaching functions as a vocationally situated and institutionally embedded practice, while teachers' dilemmas converge into three structural gaps: legitimacy, resource, and governance. In response, the study proposes an Integrated Support Framework and a staged pathway of legitimization, consolidation, and deepening to support more sustainable cultural teaching in vocational education.

Keywords: cultural teaching, vocational education, Thailand, grounded theory, support framework

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การรับรู้ของครูชาวจีนในวิทยาลัยอาชีวศึกษาของรัฐในประเทศไทย ต่อการสอนวัฒนธรรมและการรับมือกับปัญหาเชิงปฏิบัติ: การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพ

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บทคัดย่อ

การสอนวัฒนธรรมได้รับการยอมรับอย่างกว้างขวางว่าเป็นองค์ประกอบสำคัญของการพัฒนาความสามารถในการสื่อสารในการศึกษาภาษาจีนนานาชาติ แต่ยังคงยากต่อการดำรงไว้ในวิทยาลัยอาชีวศึกษาในประเทศไทย ซึ่งข้อจำกัดด้านเวลา ความชัดเจนของการประเมินผล และความเกี่ยวข้องกับภาระงานทำล้นกำหนดสิ่งที่ครูสามารถดำเนินการได้จริง งานวิจัยนี้สัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกแบบกึ่งโครงสร้างครูภาษาจีน 24 คนในวิทยาลัยอาชีวศึกษาของรัฐในประเทศไทย โดยใช้แนวทางทฤษฎีฐานรากเชิงสร้าง ความหมาย ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่าการสอนวัฒนธรรมเป็นทั้งการปฏิบัติที่ยึดโยงกับบริบทวิชาชีพและฝังอยู่ในสถาบัน ขณะที่ปัญหาของครูบรรจบอยู่ในช่องว่างเชิงโครงสร้าง 3 ประการ ได้แก่ ความชอบธรรม ทรัพยากร และการกำกับดูแล เพื่อตอบสนองต่อปัญหาเหล่านี้ งานวิจัยจึงเสนอกรอบการสนับสนุนแบบบูรณาการ และเส้นทางการพัฒนาเป็นลำดับ ได้แก่ การสร้างความชอบธรรม การเสริมความมั่นคง และการยกระดับเชิงลึก เพื่อสนับสนุนการสอนวัฒนธรรมให้มีความยั่งยืนมากขึ้นในบริบทการอาชีวศึกษา

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Introduction

International Chinese language education has expanded substantially in recent decades, and this expansion has sharpened attention to cultural teaching in Chinese language education, understood in this study as Chinese cultural teaching, as a core dimension of communicative development rather than an optional enrichment (Yang et al., 2020). Culture structures what utterances mean in context, how politeness and authority are interpreted, and how relationships are managed in interaction. In this sense, Chinese cultural teaching is directly tied to communicative competence because learners must learn to interpret culturally patterned expectations and respond appropriately in situated encounters (Baker, 2015). Chinese cultural learning is also expected to be enacted through classroom interaction and interpretive work, not through isolated cultural facts detached from communication (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Thailand provides a salient setting for this issue because Chinese learning is embedded in a service-oriented economy and a large vocational education sector, where language education is commonly expected to support workplace communication and employability (Chalamwong & Suebnusorn, 2018). Thailand's vocational system operates at national scale, and one recent study reports that institutions overseen by the Office of the Vocational Education Commission include 433 colleges (Sakdapat, 2024). In such a context, Chinese cultural teaching in vocational Chinese classrooms has clear practical relevance because vocational learners are likely to encounter culturally diverse clients, partners, and service expectations soon after graduation (Jiracheewewong, 2022).

Chinese cultural teaching in Thai vocational colleges is nevertheless confronted by persistent constraints that are experienced as everyday difficulties in classroom practice (Duangmanee & Waluyo, 2023). In addition, Chinese cultural learning is difficult to stabilise when assessment tools do not make intercultural learning visible, comparable, and reportable within institutional routines (Scarino, 2009). ICC frameworks define learning targets involving interpretive skills, interactional judgement, and appropriate participation across cultural contexts (Deardorff, 2006). This means Chinese cultural teaching requires sequencing and guided practice over time. These requirements often collide with vocational time discipline and the demand to prioritise language components that Chinese cultural teaching requires sequencing and guided practice over time. These requirements

often collide with vocational time discipline and the demand to prioritise language components that Chinese cultural teaching requires sequencing and guided practice over time. These requirements often collide with vocational time discipline and the demand to prioritise language components that are easier to test. In practice, this can mean that teachers prioritise language items and task components that can be more readily assessed, while cultural content is reduced to brief explanations, attached to isolated examples, or introduced only when it can be directly connected to visible workplace scenarios such as service etiquette, customer interaction, or role-specific communicative behaviour. Teachers also face the practical challenge of translating broad Chinese cultural aims into classroom routines that feel relevant to students who are strongly oriented toward immediate usability and workplace relevance. When Chinese cultural teaching is not clearly positioned as an assessed learning trajectory, classroom culture work can become episodic, dependent on individual teacher effort, and vulnerable to displacement when workload increases. Classroom decisions in such settings are shaped by contextual demands and institutional norms, so the space available for Chinese cultural teaching is not determined by teacher intention alone (Borg, 2003).

These realities create a clear need for research that begins from the lived conditions of vocational education rather than from abstract prescriptions about what Chinese cultural teaching should be. The gap is not simply a shortage of cultural content. The gap concerns how Chinese cultural teaching can be made feasible and sustainable within vocational structures that reward measurable outputs, regulate curriculum time, and require demonstrable relevance to occupational tasks. Teachers are the key actors who translate institutional expectations into classroom practice, and their perceptions offer an empirical entry point for understanding how Chinese cultural teaching is interpreted, prioritised, and adapted under constraint (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2017). Teacher development also depends on enabling conditions that support experimentation, collaboration, and the gradual refinement of practice, rather than relying on individual improvisation (Sellberg & Lindwall, 2025). Without a context sensitive understanding of teachers' dilemmas and the support conditions that shape their practice, improvement efforts risk remaining generic and difficult to implement in vocational colleges. This study therefore focuses on Chinese language teachers in Thai vocational colleges and treats Chinese cultural teaching as a vocationally situated communicative practice involving culturally patterned meanings, interactional norms, and workplace-

relevant intercultural judgement, which requires institutional support to become coherent, consistent, and sustainable.

Accordingly, this study pursues the following two research objectives:

1) To understand Chinese language teachers' perceptions and main dilemmas in the process of cultural teaching in Thai vocational colleges.

2) To construct a support framework and improvement pathways for Chinese language teachers' cultural teaching that fit the context of vocational education in Thailand.

Literature Review

Theoretical basis

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) offers an appropriate lens for understanding cultural teaching as a competence-oriented process rather than as the transmission of detached cultural facts (Byram, 2020). In this study, Chinese cultural teaching refers to the pedagogical work through which teachers help learners engage with culturally patterned meanings, norms, and practices associated with Chinese communicative life (Yang et al., 2020). This includes, for example, politeness expectations, relational positioning, workplace interaction conventions, and value-laden interpretive frames. The point of such teaching is not simply to provide cultural information, but to help learners interpret, compare, and respond appropriately in situated communication (Gong et al., 2018). ICC is therefore relevant here because it clarifies what cultural teaching is expected to develop and provides a principled basis for interpreting teachers' pedagogical choices beyond a simple list of cultural topics (Baker, 2022).

In ICC and intercultural language education-oriented scholarship, cultural teaching is generally understood to involve more than the transmission of factual information about a target culture. It commonly encompasses learners' engagement with culturally shaped meanings and interpretive frames, pragmatic and relational norms for interaction, and forms of comparison, reflection, and judgement that support appropriate communication across cultural contexts (Baker, 2022; Byram, 2020). For the purposes of the present study, this broad understanding is narrowed to the vocational Chinese context. More specifically, cultural teaching is treated here as pedagogical work through which teachers help learners engage with culturally patterned meanings relevant to communication, pragmatic and relational norms, workplace-related interactional

conventions, and value-sensitive issues that may require explanation, comparison, or guided discussion in class. In this sense, cultural teaching is not approached merely as an add-on body of cultural facts, nor as a wholly separate curricular domain detached from language learning. Rather, it is understood as a transversal communicative capacity enacted through Chinese language teaching, vocationally relevant scenarios, and guided intercultural interpretation in classroom practice.

Once cultural teaching is understood in this competence-oriented and vocationally situated sense, attention must also be given to how intercultural development is supported and made visible in educational settings. Intercultural competence has been conceptualised as an assessable learning outcome, with progress depending on structured opportunities for interaction, interpretation, and reflection (Deardorff, 2006). This has direct implications for classroom design. Cultural learning is more likely to become cumulative when teachers create recurring tasks that prompt learners to interpret meanings, compare perspectives, and reflect on interaction, rather than treating culture as occasional enrichment detached from communicative practice (Baker, 2012). In this sense, teachers are central not only because they introduce cultural content, but also because they decide how cultural learning is framed, practised, and recognised as evidence of development (Scarino, 2010).

In addition, cultural teaching in language education must be understood in relation to institutional priorities and accountability demands. In vocational education and training, curriculum structures and professional expectations strongly influence what teachers can sustain and what forms of learning become visible within institutional routines. This is especially relevant in Thailand, where employability-oriented programme logics and system-level arrangements shape how language outcomes are prioritised and assessed (OECD, 2021). For this reason, ICC is adopted in this study not only as a conceptual lens for understanding teachers' perceptions of cultural teaching under vocational constraints, but also as a means of clarifying why intercultural teaching in vocational settings cannot be understood apart from institutional priorities, accountability demands, and employability-oriented programme logics (Meier & Styger, 2025).

Current Status of Research

Research in intercultural language education has developed strong theoretical arguments for integrating culture into language teaching, yet evidence repeatedly shows a persistent gap between intercultural intentions and what becomes routinised in classrooms, especially when teachers must prioritise time, assessment visibility, and manageable interactional risk (Heggernes, 2021). In the field of Chinese as a foreign language, large-scale mappings show rapid growth and topic diversification, but they also suggest that studies more often emphasise outcomes, materials, or general pedagogical variables than the day-to-day processes through which cultural teaching is enacted and stabilised in instruction (Chan et al., 2022). Systematic reviews similarly indicate that the broader CSL and CFL literature has historically paid greater attention to linguistic learning and instructional effectiveness than to the question of how culture is taught as a developmental competence through sustained classroom interaction (Ma et al., 2017). As a result, cultural teaching is often treated as a normative requirement, while its feasibility as a situated and sustainable practice remains less clearly explained. What remains particularly underdeveloped is an explanation of how such intercultural aspirations are negotiated when teaching is embedded in vocational structures that privilege measurable performance, immediate usability, and occupational relevance.

Within Thailand, Chinese language education has expanded through institutional and policy channels that have increased the visibility of Chinese language and culture across educational sectors, yet this expansion does not automatically explain how Chinese cultural teaching is conceptualised and enacted inside vocational programme structures (Zeng, 2023). Vocational education is commonly shaped by competency and employability logics that prioritise modular pacing, demonstrable performance outcomes, and accountable evaluation (Chalapati & Chalapati, 2020). These conditions can compress the curricular space available for interpretive cultural learning, especially when reflection, scenario-based practice, and interactional judgement are less easily assessed than language forms or task completion. Existing discussions therefore clarify why Chinese matters in Thailand, but they do not sufficiently explain how competence-oriented cultural teaching can be sustained when general intercultural teaching models encounter vocational programme logics organised around occupational relevance, measurable outputs, and tightly regulated curriculum time.

Research on language teacher cognition has long shown that teaching practices emerge from the interaction between teachers' professional knowledge and beliefs and the contextual demands that enable or restrict particular pedagogical choices (Borg, 2003). In intercultural teaching, this interaction becomes even more significant because appropriate learning is often judged through interpretation, negotiation, and the handling of misunderstandings and value differences. In the context of teaching Chinese as an additional language, studies have shown that teachers' pedagogical cultural knowledge and intercultural orientations shape how culture is selected, framed, and translated into classroom action, while institutional constraints and resource conditions influence what can actually be sustained in practice (Gong et al., 2018). What remains less clearly theorised is how vocational constraints systematically generate recurring coping patterns, such as content triage, task simplification, and precautionary avoidance, even when teachers recognise the value of deeper intercultural work.

Comparative scholarship further indicates that implementing intercultural goals depends not on teacher goodwill alone, but also on training opportunities, institutional expectations, and available support structures (Sercu & Bandura, 2005). More recent studies likewise suggest that teachers' intentions to implement intercultural teaching are frequently moderated by practical barriers, including limited time, unclear assessment criteria, and the difficulty of handling sensitive classroom discussion in ways that feel professionally safe and institutionally legitimate (Lu et al., 2026). Taken together, the literature indicates a clear need for research that foregrounds Chinese language teachers' perceptions and dilemmas in Thai vocational colleges and that develops context-fitted support structures and improvement pathways grounded in those realities. More specifically, the present study extends existing ICC-based and vocational education research by shifting the focus from general advocacy of intercultural teaching to a process-level explanation of how cultural teaching is interpreted, prioritised, constrained, and sustained within vocationally structured educational settings. (Corbett, 2022).

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to address two objectives. The first is to explore how Chinese teachers in Thai vocational colleges perceive Chinese cultural teaching and navigate practical dilemmas in everyday instructional practice. The second is to develop an empirically grounded support framework and improvement pathways that fit the vocational education context in Thailand. A constructivist grounded theory orientation is applied because it is well suited to examining meaning making, professional reasoning, and context-dependent decision processes through participants' accounts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). At the same time, the study retains the classic grounded theory commitment to developing conceptual categories grounded in data and progressively refined through constant comparison (Chametzky, 2022). Following Charmaz's constructivist stance, we treat categories as co-constructed interpretations while retaining the constant-comparative logic of grounded theory to refine conceptual properties progressively. Intercultural Communicative Competence serves as an interpretive lens that sensitises the analysis to competence-oriented cultural teaching, including teachers' understandings of cultural goals, their pedagogical choices, and their handling of culturally situated interaction in vocational classrooms (Byram, 1997). In this study, the ICC framework informs the construction of interview prompts and supports conceptual interpretation, while the coding process remains inductive so that categories are developed from teachers' narratives rather than imposed as predetermined themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Semi structured in depth interviews are used as the main method because they enable teachers to describe concrete classroom episodes, explain rationales behind cultural content selection and task design, and articulate how institutional conditions shape what is feasible in vocational education (H. Kallio et al., 2016). Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively, with constant comparison guiding category refinement and strengthening analytic coherence until theoretical saturation was reached (Guest et al., 2006). Throughout this process, analytic trustworthiness was supported by repeated comparison across interviews and across coding stages, so that emerging interpretations were continuously checked against new and previously coded material. Because all participants were Chinese-national teachers, all interviews were conducted in Chinese. Consistent with a constructivist grounded theory approach, reflexive attention was

maintained throughout coding and category development, and analytic notes were used to document key interpretive decisions and category refinement as the analysis progressed. Theoretical saturation was judged not by sample size alone, but by whether additional interviews continued to generate new meanings or extend the properties of the emerging categories.

The resulting grounded theory categories and their integration were used not only to explain teachers' perceptions and dilemmas, but also to translate recurrent needs and constraints into a context-fitted support framework and staged improvement pathway that directly respond to the study's second objective. Sample and sampling. Participants were Chinese nationals working as Chinese language teachers in Thai public vocational colleges who had direct responsibility for cultural teaching, either through stand-alone cultural modules or through the integration of cultural content into foundation Chinese courses, culture-integrated general Chinese courses, and profession-oriented Chinese courses designed for specific vocational fields. In this study, Chinese nationality was treated as part of the inclusion criteria in order to define the participant group clearly and consistently across recruitment and analysis. Inclusion therefore focused on teachers who could provide first-hand accounts of planning and delivering cultural teaching under vocational constraints, including limited class hours, assessment expectations, and heterogeneous student preparedness. Sampling combined gatekeeper-mediated access and snowball recruitment, supported by purposive selection and later theoretical sampling as analysis developed. Initial access was facilitated by an experienced teacher who served as a gatekeeper and recommended information-rich cases across colleges and majors. After each interview, participants were invited to recommend colleagues who met the inclusion criteria, enabling the study to reach teachers across different vocational programmes and institutional contexts. To clarify the institutional context of the sample, the participating teachers were drawn through snowball recruitment from 21 Thai public vocational colleges rather than from a single institutional setting. They worked across different vocational teaching contexts and programme clusters, including tourism, hospitality, business and commerce, logistics, and other service-oriented areas in which Chinese was linked to future workplace communication. The courses represented in the sample included foundation Chinese courses, culture-integrated general Chinese courses, and profession-oriented Chinese courses, covering teaching emphases such as general language development, the integration of cultural topics into Chinese learning, and vocationally related communication. Although the identities of individual

colleges are not reported in order to protect confidentiality, this contextual variation was analytically important because cultural teaching in vocational education is shaped not only by teachers' personal beliefs, but also by programme expectations, student profiles, occupational relevance, and the extent to which culture-related learning can be embedded into assessable vocational tasks. Because grounded theory sampling is iterative, the study did not fix a target N in advance, but began with an initial expectation of approximately 20–25 interviews based on methodological guidance that sample adequacy should be determined by the study's information power, including a focused aim, a specific participant group, the use of an established sensitising framework, and in depth dialogue quality (Malterud et al., 2016). In line with this logic, recruitment continued until saturation was demonstrated in analysis rather than by counting cases. Saturation was evaluated by monitoring whether additional interviews continued to generate new codes and, more importantly, new meanings and properties within the emerging categories (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018). Following this distinction, saturation was judged to have been reached when additional interviews no longer generated substantively new open codes or extended the meanings and properties of the emerging categories. On this basis, 22 interviews were sufficient for theory construction, and two further interviews were conducted as a saturation check to confirm category stability, after which no substantive extension of the conceptual categories was observed.

Research instrument

The guide was developed with reference to ICC as a sensitising framework so that prompts could elicit teachers' understandings of cultural teaching goals, their classroom enactment of cultural content, and their approaches to supporting students' intercultural development in vocationally oriented settings (Byram, 1997). At the same time, the guide was designed in accordance with qualitative interview principles that emphasise open ended wording, logical sequencing, and flexibility for probing, which strengthens content validity by ensuring that participants can provide detailed narratives and examples rather than brief evaluative statements (H. Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide is also methodologically appropriate for grounded theory research because it supports the elicitation of process-oriented accounts, including how teachers make decisions, adjust strategies, and cope with constraints, which provides the type of rich incident-based data needed for constant comparison and category development (Charmaz, 2006).

The interview guide contains 31 open ended questions that progress from background information to perceptions and practices, then to dilemmas and coping, and finally to support needs and improvement expectations. This progression improves the scientific reasonableness of the instrument because it establishes contextual grounding before asking for reflective interpretations, and it reduces participant burden by moving from descriptive to more evaluative prompts in a natural conversational flow (H.Kallio et al., 2016). Questions address teachers' definitions of culture, criteria for cultural content selection, forms of classroom activity and task design, student reactions and misunderstandings, tensions between language teaching and cultural teaching, challenges linked to time, assessment and resources, and perceptions of what institutional or professional support would make cultural teaching more sustainable in vocational education. More specifically, the guide was designed to elicit not only teachers' treatment of cultural topics or cultural knowledge, but also their handling of pragmatic norms, workplace-relevant interactional conventions, comparative reflection on Chinese Thai differences, and value-sensitive issues that might generate misunderstanding, hesitation, or guided classroom discussion. The full interview outline is presented in Table 1 to enhance transparency and enable readers to evaluate instrument coverage and alignment with the study aims.

Table 1. Interview Outline Table

Open-ended Interview Questions for Teachers
1. Could you briefly introduce your teaching background in Thai vocational colleges, including the types of courses you teach and your current teaching responsibilities?
2. Have you previously taught Chinese in other educational settings (such as secondary schools, universities, or Confucius Institutes)? If so, how does teaching in vocational colleges differ from these contexts?
3. In your own understanding, what does “culture” include? How would you explain “what counts as culture” to your students or colleagues?
4. Compared with teaching Chinese in academic-track institutions, what differences do you perceive regarding expectations for cultural teaching in vocational colleges?

Open-ended Interview Questions for Teachers
5. In your view, what role should cultural teaching play in Chinese language courses in Thai vocational education? If someone asked why culture needs to be taught in this context, how would you respond?
6. When preparing lessons, how do you decide which cultural content is appropriate to introduce? Please illustrate with one or two examples from your own teaching.
7. For vocational college learners, which aspects of Chinese culture do you consider essential to teach, and which can be simplified or postponed? What criteria guide your decisions?
8. How do you balance linguistic knowledge, language skill development, and cultural content during your teaching? Have you felt any tension among these components?
9. Do you articulate culture-related objectives explicitly in your lesson plans? If so, how do you usually formulate such objectives?
10. Could you recall a memorable moment in your classroom when you were teaching a cultural topic? What content did you choose, what activities did you use, and how did students respond?
11. What common interests, misunderstandings, or confusions do students usually exhibit when engaging with cultural content? How do these reactions influence your instructional decisions in class?
12. Do you design culture-related tasks connected to workplace scenarios (e.g., front-desk service, tour guiding, complaint handling)? If yes, please describe an example and its classroom effect.
13. When teaching different majors or different grade levels, do you adjust your cultural content, depth of explanation, or task design? What informs these adjustments?
14. Has there been a moment in your classroom when a student's question or comment led you to change your planned approach to explaining a cultural issue? Please describe what happened.
15. What challenges have you encountered in teaching culture in vocational colleges, such as time constraints, limited materials, students' linguistic foundation, or assessment requirements?

Open-ended Interview Questions for Teachers
16. Have you experienced situations where certain cultural topics seemed important for students' future work but you had to simplify or omit them due to institutional constraints? Please provide examples.
17. Have you encountered noticeable value conflicts or cognitive disagreements when teaching cultural content—for example, students expressing discomfort or disagreement with certain Chinese norms or practices?
18. In what ways do you think the institutional culture, student profiles, or employment orientation of vocational colleges influence students' responses to cultural teaching?
19. Do you perceive expectations from parents, administrators, or partner companies regarding the “practical usefulness” of Chinese language courses? How do such expectations shape your cultural teaching?
20. When students question or reject a cultural phenomenon, how do you usually handle the situation (e.g., reinterpretation, guided discussion, temporary suspension)?
21. When selecting cultural examples, do you worry about reinforcing stereotypes or causing misunderstandings? How do you adjust your teaching in such cases?
22. Do you encourage students to compare Chinese and Thai cultural practices from their own perspectives or to reflect on cultural differences? What topics usually prompt such reflection?
23. Are there cultural topics you intentionally avoid (e.g., politics, religion, gender, workplace hierarchy)? What considerations lead you to make such choices?
24. Looking back at your teaching, have you recognized moments when your own cultural assumptions or value positions influenced how you presented cultural content? Did this lead you to revise your teaching strategies?
25. What types of support or resources would be most helpful for improving cultural teaching in vocational colleges (e.g., teaching materials, case banks, curriculum time, assessment flexibility, professional development opportunities)?
26. Have you participated in culture-related teacher training or professional learning? To what extent did these programs address your real challenges in vocational education?
27. If you had the opportunity to redesign a module specifically for cultural teaching in vocational colleges, what content and teaching methods would you most want to include?

Open-ended Interview Questions for Teachers
28. From a professional development perspective, what forms of training do you think would most effectively enhance teachers' capacity for cultural teaching (e.g., workplace immersion, intercultural case discussions, classroom observation and feedback, collaborative lesson planning)?
29. If you could give one recommendation to your institution or partner organizations regarding support for cultural teaching, what would it be?
30. Beyond all the topics we have discussed, are there additional experiences, observations, or reflections related to cultural teaching in Thai vocational colleges that you believe are important for this study to capture?
31. If you were to summarize your overall impression or main insight about teaching Chinese culture in Thai vocational colleges in one or two sentences, what would you say?

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

Results

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Table 2 provides a concise profile of the participating teachers. The sample is predominantly young and early career, with all participants holding stable full-time or long-term contracts and relatively high educational attainment. Participants reported broad teaching responsibilities across foundation, profession oriented, and culture integrated courses, indicating that cultural content is routinely embedded in vocational Chinese programmes rather than treated as a peripheral add on. At the same time, most teachers reported that intentional cultural teaching is frequent or occasional and that challenges are encountered with similar regularity, which establishes a clear descriptive context for the subsequent qualitative analysis.

Table 2. Basic Information

Screening dimension	Category	n	%
Age (Q1)	20–29 years	19	79.2
	30–39 years	5	20.8
	40–49 years	0	0

Screening dimension	Category	n	%
	50 years or above	0	0
Gender (Q2)	Male	9	37.5
	Female	15	62.5
Highest educational qualification (Q3)	Bachelor's degree	10	41.7
	Master's degree	14	58.3
	Doctoral degree	0	0
Full-time / long-term contract status (Q4)	Yes	24	100
	No	0	0
Types of courses currently taught (multiple responses) (Q5)*	Chinese language foundation courses	19	79.2
	Courses integrating Chinese cultural content	24	100
	Profession-oriented Chinese courses	16	66.7
	Other	3	12.5
Years of experience teaching Chinese (incl. cultural components) (Q6)	Less than 1 year	0	0
	1–3 years	17	70.8
	3–5 years	6	25.0
	5–10 years	1	4.2
	More than 10 years	0	0
Frequency of intentional cultural teaching (Q7)	Yes, frequently	14	58.3
	Occasionally	10	41.7
	Rarely / almost never	0	0
Challenges encountered in teaching cultural content (Q8)	Frequently	14	58.3
	Occasionally	9	37.5
	Rarely / almost never	1	4.2
Willingness to participate in a 45– 60 min interview (Q9)	Yes	24	100
	Unsure	0	0

Screening dimension	Category	n	%
	No	0	0
Consent to audio-recording (Q10)	Yes	24	100
	No	0	0

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

Grounded-Theory Three-Stage Coding Results

Table 3 reports the three-stage grounded theory coding structure developed from the interview data. Through iterative constant comparison, the analysis moved from open codes capturing recurrent meanings in teachers' accounts, to axial categories that organised these meanings into interactional and institutional processes, and finally to five selective categories that integrate the teachers' experiences into a coherent explanatory framework of cultural teaching in Thai vocational colleges (Charmaz, 2006). The resulting coding system shows that cultural teaching is not a discrete classroom activity, but a process shaped by a situated professional ecology, legitimised through pragmatic curricular reasoning, enacted through negotiated pedagogical work, governed through intercultural interaction management, and oriented toward reflexive systemic reconstruction. Across the interview data, cultural teaching was described not as a single content block but as a patterned set of practical emphases and pedagogical enactments. In content terms, teachers most often referred to culturally patterned meanings relevant to communication, pragmatic and relational norms, workplace-related interactional conventions, and issues that required explanation, comparison, or careful handling because they could easily give rise to misunderstanding or discomfort. In enactment terms, cultural teaching was commonly realised through explanation and clarification, scenario-based vocational tasks, guided comparison between Chinese and Thai practices, and the managed handling of misunderstanding, tension, or sensitive classroom discussion. This pattern does not impose a predefined framework on the data; rather, it summarises how cultural teaching most commonly appeared in the participants' accounts and helps clarify the concept in the context of vocational Chinese classrooms.

First, the selective category Situated Professional Ecology captures how teachers' cultural teaching is anchored in their professional trajectories and in cross setting comparisons that make vocational education appear as a distinct instructional environment. Within this ecology, teachers' decisions are patterned by an institutional constraint structure in which expectations and structural limits delimit what cultural teaching can realistically achieve. Second, Pragmatic Curricular Legitimation reflects the reasoning through which teachers justify culture as legitimate content in vocational programmes, particularly by linking cultural teaching to employability and occupational relevance. This legitimation process is accompanied by a clear content triage logic in which teachers differentiate between essential cultural content that must be taught and cultural content that is deferred or simplified under time and assessment pressures.

Third, Negotiated Pedagogical Enactment explains how cultural teaching is accomplished in practice through teachers' active negotiation of resources, objectives, and task forms. Teachers rely on bricolage resource acquisition and ongoing language culture balancing, translate cultural aims into workplace scenario tasks, and cope with classroom contingency through real time pedagogical pivots and occasional pedagogical reduction. Fourth, Intercultural Interaction Governance captures the interactional core of cultural teaching, where teachers manage learner interpretation dynamics including curiosity triggers, misunderstandings, and high impact classroom moments. In parallel, teachers engage in intercultural risk governance by handling value tension episodes, facilitating conflict, managing stereotyping risks, avoiding sensitive topics when necessary, and reflecting on their own positionality while prompting comparative reflection. Fifth, Reflexive Systemic Reconstruction integrates teachers' future oriented accounts, showing that they develop a professional reflexive vision for redesigning cultural teaching while also articulating institutional support mechanisms through concrete resource requests and recommendations. Taken together, the coding results clarify the process structure through which cultural teaching is defined, constrained, enacted, governed, and reimagined in Thai vocational education.

Table 3. Three-level coding

Selective category	Linked axial categories	Linked open codes
1. Situated Professional Ecology	1. Professional anchoring	1.Teaching trajectory; 2. Cross-setting comparison; 4. Contextual distinction

Selective category	Linked axial categories	Linked open codes
	2. Institutional constraint structure	7. Institutional expectation framing; 20 Structural constraints
2. Pragmatic Curricular Legitimation	3. Cultural legitimacy justification	3. Culture scope; 5 Cultural teaching rationale; 6. Employability alignment
	4. Content triage logic	8. Content selection criteria; 9. Essential culture set; 10. Deferred culture set
3. Negotiated Pedagogical Enactment	5. Bricolage resource acquisition	21. Resource bricolage; 12. Language–culture balancing; 13. Culture objective articulation
	6. Vocational task translation	17. Workplace scenario tasks; 18 .Major-level adaptation
	7. Classroom contingency coping	19. Real-time pedagogical pivot; 11. Pedagogical reduction strategy
4. Intercultural Interaction Governance	8. Learner interpretation dynamics	15. Student curiosity triggers; 16. Student misunderstandings; 14. High-impact pedagogical moments
	9. Intercultural risk governance	23. Value tension episodes; 24. Conflict facilitation; 25. Stereotype management; 27. Sensitive topic avoidance; 28. Teacher positionality awareness; 26. Comparative reflection prompts
5. Reflexive Systemic Reconstruction	10. Professional reflexive vision	30. Curriculum design vision; 32. Core essence metaphor
	11. Institutional support mechanisms	29. Support resource wishlist; 31. Institutional support recommendation

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the authors

Integrated Support Framework and Improvement Pathway

Figure 1 presents the integrated support framework derived from the grounded theory coding results and translates the five selective categories into a process-oriented explanation of how cultural teaching can be strengthened in Thai vocational colleges. Rather than treating teachers' dilemmas as isolated classroom problems, the framework links them to structural conditions that shape what teachers can legitimately teach, what resources they can mobilise, and how intercultural interaction can be governed in vocational settings. To make this logic clear, the figure can be read in three steps: first, the structural gaps generated from teachers' experiences; second, the integrated support pillars that respond to those gaps; and third, the staged pathway through which improvement can become sustainable.

More explicitly, the three structural gaps shown in Figure 1 were developed as an analytical compression of the five selective categories presented in Figure 1 rather than as a one-to-one restatement of them. The legitimacy gap is informed jointly by Situated Professional Ecology and Pragmatic Curricular Legitimation. The former captures the institutional and contextual conditions within which cultural teaching is positioned in vocational education, while the latter shows how teachers justify cultural teaching through curricular relevance, employability alignment, and decisions about essential versus deferrable content. The resource gap is informed primarily by Negotiated Pedagogical Enactment, because this category shows how teachers rely on bricolage, adaptation, and pedagogical reduction when the resources needed for sustained cultural teaching are unevenly available. In this study, those resources include not only teaching materials and task templates, but also instructional time, institutionally supported teaching conditions, and practice-linked support for workplace-relevant scenarios. The governance gap is informed primarily by Intercultural Interaction Governance, and here governance refers mainly to the classroom-level management of misunderstanding, value tension, stereotype risk, sensitive topics, and comparative reflection in intercultural teaching. Although this gap is shaped indirectly by assessment expectations and wider institutional norms, its most immediate expression lies in the governance of classroom interaction itself. By contrast, Reflexive Systemic Reconstruction does not constitute a fourth structural gap. Instead, it functions as an integrative and forward-looking category that translates the

problems identified through the three gaps into the Integrated Support Framework and the staged pathway of legitimization, consolidation, and deepening.

On the left side of the figure, four practice domains generated from Categories 1 to 4 are consolidated into three structural gaps. Situated professional ecology and pragmatic curricular legitimization together reveal a legitimacy gap, because teachers must repeatedly justify why cultural teaching matters and how it aligns with employability-oriented vocational curricula. Negotiated pedagogical enactment highlights a resource gap because teachers often rely on bricolage and ad hoc adaptation when the resources needed for sustained cultural teaching are not systematically available. Intercultural interaction governance reveals a governance gap because teachers must manage misunderstanding, value tension, sensitivity boundaries, and related interactional risks without stable pedagogical guidance, shared norms, or sufficient professional support.

The middle panel of Figure 1 specifies three integrated support pillars that respond directly to these structural gaps. These are competency-based curricular legitimization support, a task-based vocational resource ecosystem, and professional intercultural governance support. Together, these pillars indicate that sustainable improvement cannot depend on individual teacher effort alone. Instead, support must be organised in ways that make cultural teaching more institutionally legible, more practically resourced, and more professionally governable. The right side of the figure therefore represents reflexive systemic reconstruction as the long-term vision, emphasising that meaningful change depends on moving beyond individual coping and toward a stronger institutional carrying capacity for cultural teaching.

The lower band of Figure 1 expresses this transformation as a staged improvement pathway. Phase 1 focuses on legitimization by stabilising cultural teaching as a competency-based curricular responsibility within vocational education logics. Phase 2 focuses on consolidation by building a usable ecosystem of vocational tasks, scenarios, and resources that teachers can adapt without excessive bricolage. Phase 3 focuses on deepening by strengthening intercultural governance capacity, including norms and support for handling value tensions, guiding comparative reflection, and managing sensitivity boundaries in culturally diverse classrooms. Together, the framework and pathway clarify how recurrent support needs identified in teachers' narratives can be reorganised into an actionable structure for vocational settings.

In Figure 1, the staged pathway begins with legitimization because teachers' accounts show that cultural teaching becomes sustainable only when it is recognisable within the local evaluative logic of vocational curricula, especially employability alignment, timetable discipline, and assessable outputs. This sequencing is consistent with the view that practices persist when they can be publicly justified and institutionally defended, rather than remaining dependent on individual commitment alone (Suchman, 1995). Phase 1 is therefore not an additional step after implementation, but the condition that makes later resource building and governance routines more likely to take hold.

The move from consolidation to deepening is then theorised as a capacity shift rather than a simple increase in effort. When vocationally relevant materials and task templates are scarce, teachers' cultural teaching predictably relies on bricolage, which is adaptive but difficult to transfer across majors and cohorts (Baker & Nelson, 2005). Building a reusable task-based resource ecosystem therefore functions as a consolidation mechanism that stabilises implementation before more demanding work of intercultural governance can be expected. This also explains why the three pillars are presented as coupled supports: when constraints span legitimacy, resources, and professional risk, sustainable improvement requires a configuration of supports that fits the setting and unfolds through sequential conditions (Aarons et al., 2011; Damschroder et al., 2009).

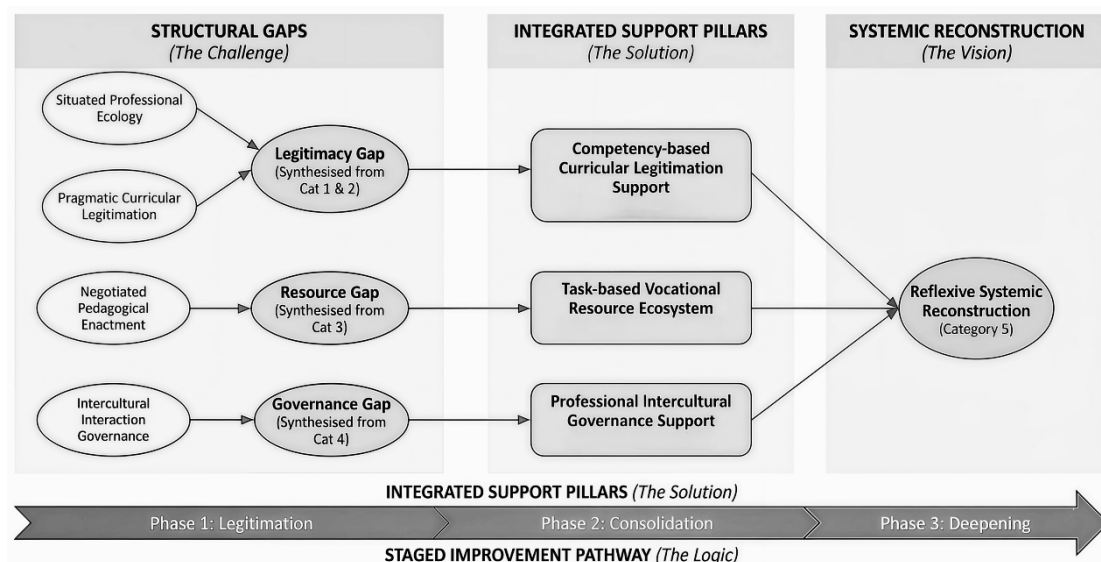


Figure 1. Integrated Support Framework for Cultural Teaching

Source: Analyzed and concluded by the author

Discussion

The dilemmas reported by teachers are therefore not isolated classroom level difficulties, but practice outcomes shaped by three interlocking structural conditions, namely curricular legitimacy, resource provision, and interaction governance. With respect to the second objective, the discussion then translates this structural account into an actionable support logic by consolidating recurrent teacher needs and recommendations into an integrated support framework and a staged improvement pathway. This pathway clarifies why strengthening cultural teaching must unfold through sequential phases of legitimation, consolidation, and deepening, rather than through sporadic training initiatives or the simple accumulation of individual effort. On this basis, the section proceeds to elaborate the theoretical implications, practical implications, and study limitations, thereby addressing the research objectives and clarifying the scholarly contributions and applied value of the study.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to theory by extending intercultural and language education research from a predominantly pedagogy centred account toward a structurally situated explanation of cultural teaching in vocational contexts. Much existing work has treated cultural teaching through competence frameworks and classroom level design, clarifying what intercultural learning should involve and how it can be supported through meaningful tasks and reflection (Deardorff, 2006). Teacher cognition research further shows that teachers' beliefs and contextual judgements matter for what is enacted in practice (Borg, 2003). However, these lines of scholarship often leave under specified how vocational institutional arrangements shape the boundaries of what teachers can justify, resource, and sustain. This study locates cultural teaching within a situated professional ecology. It therefore explains constraints as institutionally produced rather than reducing variation to differences in teachers' capacity or willingness. It therefore reframes cultural teaching as an organisationally embedded practice in which institutional positioning becomes part of the mechanism, not merely the backdrop. More specifically, the study shows that such cultural teaching is enacted less as the transmission of isolated cultural facts than as a transversal communicative

practice involving interpretive meaning-making, pragmatic and relational norms, workplace interaction conventions, and the guided handling of value-sensitive issues in vocational settings.

A second theoretical contribution lies in offering a mechanism-based account that differs from the common tendency to summarise challenges as a descriptive inventory. Studies of vocational and workplace oriented intercultural competence emphasise that real world interaction, uncertainty, and service expectations matter for competence development, but they often remain outcome oriented rather than specifying how dilemmas are generated and stabilised inside institutional routines (Koc, 2021). In parallel, work on bricolage has shown that improvisation is not random creativity but a patterned response to persistent scarcity (Baker & Nelson, 2005). Building on these insights, this study specifies three mechanism-distinct gaps—legitimacy, resource, and governance—to explain why teachers repeatedly drift toward defensible and low-risk forms of cultural teaching even when they recognise the value of deeper intercultural learning. The value of deeper intercultural learning. The distinctive theoretical move is that the gaps are not treated as separate obstacles but as interacting structural conditions that configure teachers' action space and reproduce coping cycles over time. In this sense, the study provides an explanatory vocabulary that connects institutional legibility, resource circulation, and interactional risk to recurring classroom decisions, thereby making persistence itself intelligible.

What this study adds is a sequenced mechanism logic that explains why these supports do not function as parallel options in vocational culture teaching. Competency based education research has argued that implementation depends on the clarity and evaluability of learning expectations, and it has offered guidance for aligning practice with assessable outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2003). Research on task-oriented language teaching in vocational education likewise suggests that workplace aligned tasks can enhance contextual fit and learning usability (Chen et al., 2025). Separately, scholarship on professional learning communities highlights how collaborative structures can convert individual experience into shared routines and organisational capacity (Oppi & Eisenschmidt, 2022). What this study adds is a sequenced mechanism logic that explains why these supports do not function as parallel options in vocational culture teaching.

It argues that legitimization establishes institutional visibility, consolidation stabilises implementable capacity through reusable task organised resources, and deepening builds governance routines that make multi-site intercultural interaction predictable and professionally

supported. The contribution is therefore not merely proposing more support, but theorising how support must be ordered and coupled to shift cultural teaching from individualised coping toward sustainable reconstruction.

Practical Implications

This study has practical significance in that it translates Chinese teachers' largely individualised and experience-driven efforts in cultural teaching within Thai vocational colleges into a set of actionable enabling conditions that multiple stakeholders can jointly build and sustain. More concretely, the three support pillars proposed in this study can be translated into several practical directions for future development. In terms of curricular legitimization, cultural learning can be embedded more explicitly into course and programme learning outcomes, with assessment criteria designed to capture students' abilities in interpretation, comparison, scenario response, and reflective judgement. In terms of resource ecosystem development, teaching materials may be organised as reusable case resources according to vocational sector, communicative scenario, and level of task complexity, so that teachers can adapt them more efficiently across programmes and cohorts. In terms of governance support, future development may include institutional procedures and teacher training modules that help teachers respond more confidently to misunderstanding, sensitive topics, value tension, stereotype risk, and guided comparative reflection in classroom practice.

For system-level actors such as vocational education authorities and curriculum designers, the most direct pathway is to render cultural learning legible within competency language and assessable outcomes that fit vocational timetabling and evaluation logics, for example by aligning culture-related learning with evidence that can be credibly demonstrated in scenario performance, service scripts, and brief reflective outputs. For college leaders and programme managers, improvement is less about organising more one-off activities than about institutionalising a task-oriented resource circulation mechanism: developing reusable case-based materials anchored in occupational scenarios, establishing routines for updating and sharing resources across majors, and reducing the recurring "start-from-scratch" burden that currently drives teachers into high-cost bricolage. For enterprise and practicum partners, feasible engagement lies in co-specifying typical workplace interaction scenarios and feedback criteria, thereby enabling teachers to translate cultural

content into teachable, practisable, and evaluable vocational tasks rather than abstract narration. For frontline teachers and Thai co-teachers, the practical route is to organise cultural teaching around authentic vocational tasks while putting explicit interaction rules and response procedures in place for sensitive discussions, so that intercultural risk is no longer privatised as individual teacher responsibility. Taken together, these pathways strengthen institutional carrying capacity by stabilising curricular legitimacy, improving resource transferability, and making intercultural interaction more governable, thereby increasing the likelihood that cultural teaching can be sustained with depth and continuity across cohorts and practice sites.

Limitations

This study offers a mechanism-oriented explanation of Chinese cultural teaching in Thai vocational colleges, yet its claims should be interpreted within several boundaries. The evidence is generated from in depth interviews with Chinese teachers, which provides strong access to teachers' sense making, adaptive practices, and perceived constraints, but it also means that institutional production of legitimacy, resourcing, and governance is reconstructed primarily through the teacher perspective rather than through systematic triangulation with administrators, Thai co teachers, enterprise mentors, students, parents, or policy documents. The study is further bounded by contextual specificity. Thai public vocational education has particular curricular pacing, assessment expectations, and school enterprise arrangements that shape what cultural teaching can plausibly become, so the structural gaps and the coupled support pillars are best treated as an analytically transferable explanation rather than a one to one template for other systems. In addition, the analysis relies on retrospective accounts rather than longitudinal observation, which limits how precisely the timing and turning points of practice change can be specified, especially when considering how bricolage and risk avoidance may stabilise over semesters and how staged improvement may unfold under shifting institutional conditions.

Against this background, the Integrated Support Framework proposed in this study provides an analytically grounded foundation for future research on contextual adaptation, pilot application, and evaluative testing. Subsequent studies may further refine the framework by examining how its components operate in specific institutional settings and under different implementation conditions.

Conclusion and Future Research

Conclusion

This study through a constructivist grounded theory analysis of interview data, develops an explanatory account of why persistent dilemmas arise and what conditions make sustainable improvement possible. The findings show that cultural teaching is experienced less as the delivery of cultural facts than as an institutionally embedded practice shaped by a situated professional ecology, pragmatic curricular legitimation, negotiated pedagogical enactment, and intercultural interaction governance, with teachers continually calibrating cultural scope, task relevance, and classroom contingencies under vocational constraints. Synthesising these patterns, the study identifies three mechanism distinct structural gaps that delimit teachers' action space: a legitimacy gap that keeps cultural teaching institutionally marginal and weakly assessable, a resource gap that normalises bricolage and undermines transferability across majors and cohorts, and a governance gap that heightens interactional uncertainty and encourages precautionary routines when value tensions and sensitive topics arise. In response, the study proposes an Integrated Support Framework in which competency based curricular legitimation support, a task based vocational resource ecosystem, and professional intercultural governance support operate as coupled enabling pillars, and it further clarifies a staged improvement pathway through legitimation, consolidation, and deepening, by which cultural teaching can shift from individualised coping toward reflexive systemic reconstruction within vocational education settings.

Future Research

Future research can extend these contributions by strengthening transferability, causal plausibility, and evaluability. Comparative designs across institutional types, programme clusters, and governance arrangements would help clarify which elements of the structural gap explanation are robust across contexts and which require recalibration. Multi actor triangulation is also needed to map how legitimacy, resource circulation, and interaction governance are co produced through decision making and coordination, which can be achieved by integrating interviews with leaders and partners, student perspectives, and documentary evidence such as syllabi, assessment rubrics, internship agreements, and activity guidelines. Process sensitive studies that follow cultural teaching across multiple teaching cycles could directly observe reproduction loops and stage transitions,

identifying concrete triggers that shift practice from coping to reconstruction. Finally, measurement development and mixed methods testing could translate the proposed gaps and pillars into operational indicators, enabling evaluation of staged interventions and the conditions under which particular support configurations become sufficient to sustain deeper, safer, and more vocationally aligned intercultural learning.

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