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Reframing Chinese Food Culture as a Curricular Resource in International Chinese Language Education

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Abstract:
International Chinese Language Education now asks learners to do more than remember vocabulary and produce correct sentences. They also need to understand how Chinese is used in ordinary cultural settings and how those meanings can be explained to people from different backgrounds. Chinese food is well suited to this task, yet its classroom use is still often limited to menu terms, festival activities, and short cultural notes. Drawing on literature analysis and theoretical synthesis, this article considers how food culture can be reorganized as a curricular resource. The discussion is developed from four connected perspectives: language learning, intercultural understanding, embodied cognition, and cultural communication. It argues that food-related teaching can place language in recognizable situations, provide concrete points for comparison, bring sensory participation into learning, and give students material for intercultural explanation. The article also identifies four practical weaknesses in current teaching: fragmented resources, shallow interpretation of symbols, one-off experiential activities, and limited training in cultural expression. In response, it proposes a language-cognition-experience-communication framework for curriculum design. The central claim is that food culture becomes educationally productive only when its materials are graded, its meanings are interpreted, its practices are revisited, and learners are asked to communicate what they have understood.

Keywords:
International Chinese Language Education, Chinese Food Culture, Curriculum Development, Embodied Cognition, Intercultural Communication

1.Introduction

International Chinese Language Education cannot be assessed only by asking whether learners know enough words or can produce grammatically acceptable sentences. A student may order a dish correctly and still hesitate when a host offers food for the third time. Another may know the expression “It tastes good” but not know how to praise a meal without sounding distant or exaggerated. These are not minor matters added

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after language learning. They show that successful use depends on tacit expectations about politeness, relationships, timing, and the meaning of ordinary acts.

Food brings this issue into view very quickly. Many beginners meet Chinese food through a textbook dialogue about menus, prices, or preferences. Once the exchange has been completed, the class often moves on. Less time is spent asking why people share dishes, why refusing food may require several turns, or why a family meal can matter even when the food itself is simple. Familiarity makes food easy to introduce, but it can also make teachers treat it as self-explanatory. As a result, food appears everywhere in Chinese-language materials while food culture, understood as a system of practices and meanings, receives much less sustained attention.

This distinction matters for curriculum design. A topic becomes a resource only when teachers decide what learners should notice, how the topic will return, and what kind of language or interpretation it should support. Without those decisions, even a rich cultural practice remains an illustration. The learner sees it, perhaps enjoys it, but has no reason to connect it with later work.

The field has already discussed the relation between language and culture, curriculum reform, digital teaching, international communication, and educational quality. Yet much of that discussion concerns which cultural topics should be included or how a single activity should be delivered. A prior problem remains unsettled: how does an everyday practice become a teachable resource that develops across levels and returns in later learning? This question is important because isolated exposure does not automatically produce cumulative understanding.

The present article addresses three issues. First, what educational value becomes available when Chinese food culture is treated as a curricular resource rather than as occasional enrichment? Second, why is that value only partly realized in current practice? Third, what forms of curriculum design could make the connection more durable? The study uses literature analysis and theoretical synthesis, while also drawing on recurring situations in Chinese-language teaching. It does not claim that one model will suit every institution. Program length, learner background, local food access, staffing, and assessment requirements vary considerably. The aim is instead to identify design principles that can be adapted without losing the link between language and cultural practice. The article is therefore analytical rather than an evaluation of one particular course. Its examples are used to make curricular problems visible, not to claim that all classrooms operate in the same way. This distinction also limits the scope of the conclusions: the proposed framework still needs to be tested through classroom observation, learner work, and longer-term assessment in different settings. International Chinese Language Education here refers to Chinese instruction for non-native speakers, including programs for international students in China and Chinese-language education overseas.

2.The Value-Generating Logic of Integrating Chinese Food Culture into International Chinese Language Education

A cultural topic does not earn a place in the curriculum simply because it is interesting or recognizably Chinese. It becomes useful when it helps learners deal with situations, relationships, and meanings that language forms alone do not explain. Food culture has this potential because it brings linguistic choice, social con-

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vention, bodily experience, and cultural interpretation into the same event. A meal involves words, but also timing, gesture, attention, memory, and judgment. Its value is therefore relational rather than automatic. The same dumpling-making session may function as entertainment in one course and as a serious learning task in another, depending on what precedes it, what learners are asked to observe, and how the experience is revisited.

2.1. The Contextualized Nature of Language Learning

Language learning and cultural understanding do not develop along separate tracks. They take shape together when learners use language in particular situations and notice what those situations require [1]. This is easy to state in theory, but its practical consequences are visible in small classroom problems. A student who knows the names of dishes may still be unable to ask whether a soup contains pork, respond when an item is sold out, or soften a refusal when eating with an older host.

Food-related communication is frequent and unavoidable. It occurs in university dining halls, restaurants, supermarkets, delivery applications, dormitory kitchens, and informal meals with friends. A beginner may not yet have enough Chinese to discuss classical philosophy, but the same learner must still buy breakfast, explain an allergy, or decide what to bring to a shared meal. Food can therefore enter instruction early, before extensive linguistic or cultural knowledge has been accumulated.

The ordinary use of delivery applications offers another example. A learner must distinguish dish names from cooking methods, read comments about portion size, decide whether a request is polite, and deal with an unexpected telephone call from the courier. The language is practical, but the interaction also reveals assumptions about convenience, service, and responsibility. A textbook exercise can prepare part of the task; only a fuller context shows how the parts fit together.

Its value also lies in the density of language use gathered around a single event. Hosting a meal may involve greetings, forms of address, offers, refusals, expressions of modesty, comments on taste, and choices about when to accept what is offered. When these forms are distributed across unrelated units, learners may remember them as separate items. Around an actual table, however, they become connected. A sentence can be grammatically correct and still sound abrupt because it is directed to the wrong person or used at the wrong moment.

For this reason, adding a few food facts to a language lesson is not enough. Food-related situations can instead serve as an organizing setting in which vocabulary, grammar, discourse, pragmatics, and cultural knowledge are used together. The learner is no longer asked only how a sentence is formed, but why one expression works better than another in a given relationship.

Jin Binghao describes Chinese food culture as a civilizational system that has moved far beyond the satisfaction of hunger. It includes regional cuisines, dietary practices associated with social groups, ethnic and religious customs, banquet ritual, the idea that medicine and food share a common origin, and the moral and aesthetic meanings attached to tea, wine, and formal dining [2]. This wider view is useful for language education because it turns food from a convenient topic into a route toward history, social order, belief, and everyday values.

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2.2. The Development of Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is not the same as knowing a large number of facts about China. Learners also need to delay quick judgments, compare an unfamiliar practice with something they know, and revise the comparison when it proves too simple. Food offers a practical starting point because every learner already has experience of eating with other people. They know what may be served on an important day, who prepares a family meal, whether guests are expected to finish everything, and what behavior counts as hospitality in their own setting.

A Lunar New Year's Eve dinner may first look like a collection of festive dishes. Its social meaning becomes easier to approach when learners recall a meal connected with a major holiday at home. The foods may be different, but the act of gathering can serve a similar purpose: it confirms family ties. The same method can clarify why a Chinese host repeatedly encourages a guest to eat more. To an unfamiliar listener, the repetition may feel unnecessary. Placed beside another form of hospitality, it can be understood as care, though the guest may still experience pressure.

Comparison does not erase difference. Nor should it reduce an unfamiliar practice to a local equivalent. Food habits are shaped by history, region, health beliefs, family structure, and individual preference. Comparison simply supplies an initial foothold. From there, learners can ask why a familiar human concern is organized differently.

Seasonal eating illustrates this movement. The idea that some foods are more suitable at certain times of year reflects a relation between the body and environmental rhythm. The traditional concern with color, aroma, taste, presentation, and serving vessels raises another issue: a dish is evaluated through relations among several qualities, not through taste alone. Such ideas become empty labels when presented only as "features of Chinese culture." They are easier to grasp when learners observe, taste, compare, and discuss specific practices.

Teachers also need to be cautious with broad contrasts between "Chinese" and "Western" thought. These labels may identify general tendencies, but they can hide internal diversity and turn two large traditions into fixed opposites. A better comparison begins with a concrete meal, family, region, or communicative event. Learners can then identify both resemblance and difference without treating either culture as homogeneous.

Chen Wei argues that intercultural understanding is not produced by mechanically collecting cultural material. It grows through plural dialogue, a fusion of horizons, and mutual reflection [3]. Food gives these processes a tangible point of departure. Learners can start from a flavor they found unfamiliar, a rule they misunderstood, or a family practice that reminded them of home. The movement from reaction to interpretation is where intercultural learning begins.

A useful classroom comparison should therefore remain open to correction. Learners might first equate the Lunar New Year's Eve dinner with Christmas dinner, Thanksgiving, Eid, or another important family meal. That association can help, but it should not become the final answer. Teachers can ask who is expected to attend, what absence means, how labor is divided, and whether the meal has changed across generations. The comparison then becomes a question rather than a label.

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2.3. Embodied Cognition and the Corporeal Nature of Food Culture

Embodied cognition challenges the idea that understanding is created by the mind alone. Barsalou holds that cognition is grounded in bodily experience and situated interaction; perception, action, and engagement with the environment all contribute to meaning [4]. In educational terms, this means that learners do not understand only by receiving explanations. They also understand by handling objects, making movements, noticing sensations, and responding within a situation.

Tea culture offers a simple example. A learner may memorize the names of utensils and the sequence of a tea ritual, yet something remains absent if the learner has never warmed a cup, watched the leaves open in hot water, or noticed how temperature changes the taste. The written account is not wrong. It is incomplete because the words have no sensory reference.

Food makes this gap difficult to ignore. Nobody can taste on another person's behalf. Cooking involves the hands, eyes, nose, and attention to timing. Eating with others also requires bodily judgment: where to sit, how far to reach, when to serve someone else, or when to raise a glass. These details carry social meaning, but they are difficult to acquire through definition alone.

The ordinary language classroom tends to keep the body still. Students read, listen, repeat, and watch. Food-related work can alter that arrangement. When learners make dumplings, they practise words for flour, filling, rolling, folding, boiling, and steaming. At the same time, they feel whether the dough is too dry, discover why an edge must be sealed, and notice how several people can work around one table while talking. The activity may also prompt questions: why is dumpling-making represented as a family task, and why does making food together matter when frozen dumplings are readily available?

Such experiences can leave memories tied to particular events. A verb used while flour sticks to one's fingers or filling leaks from a wrapper may be easier to recall than the same verb copied from a list. Sensation, action, emotion, and language are joined in the memory. Still, experience should not replace explanation. A lively activity without preparation or reflection can remain only a pleasant afternoon. The stronger design asks learners to interpret what they did, compare it with prior knowledge, and reuse the language afterwards.

Embodied knowledge is also social rather than purely sensory. The taste of a dish may be personal, but the way it is offered, shared, or refused is learned with other people. A learner who reaches across a table, serves an older person, or waits before beginning to eat is acting within a field of expectations. For teaching, this means that sensory tasks should be paired with observation of interaction, not reduced to statements about flavor alone.

2.4. Shifts in International Communication

The international communication of Chinese culture now occurs in a media environment where audiences are not simply passive recipients. People comment, adapt, compare, and retell what they encounter. International Chinese Language Education therefore works not only as language instruction but also as a site of intercultural exchange. The distinction between transmission and dialogue is important here. Transmission supplies information; dialogue allows meanings to be questioned and rebuilt in interaction.

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Food fits this shift well because it offers a relatively easy point of entry. Someone who would avoid a discussion of politics or philosophy may still be curious about a regional dish, a cooking technique, or the habits of a Chinese restaurant. Food is not without history or ideology, but it usually feels less confrontational as an opening subject. A bowl of noodles may begin a conversation that a formal lecture would not.

Food also carries stories. A dish can be linked with local climate, migration, scarcity, trade, or an accidental change in a kitchen. Such accounts are easier to remember than a list of cultural characteristics because they involve people, places, and change over time. They can be retold in another language without requiring the speaker to reproduce a formal explanation word for word.

Participation extends the communicative value. An international learner who cooks Mapo Tofu, adjusts the spiciness, records the process, and explains the result online is no longer merely receiving information. The learner selects what to translate, what to compare, and what may puzzle friends. The account may contain uncertainty or humor, but precisely for that reason it can reach audiences beyond the classroom. A polished institutional message and a learner's hesitant account do different work. The former may provide authority and range; the latter shows the process of encounter. When both are available, audiences can see Chinese food not as a finished display but as something interpreted through contact, adjustment, and conversation.

These exchanges also travel through small networks: a dormitory meal, a photograph sent to family, a restaurant recommendation, or a short video explaining why a dish tasted different from expectation. Learners can become cultural interlocutors without being asked to speak as official representatives. Such learner-led communication is consistent with broader efforts to strengthen the international communication of Chinese culture and present contemporary China to overseas audiences [5–6]. Food culture thus serves both as teaching material and as something learners can later remake, explain, and share.

This communicative potential does not remove the need for accuracy. Personal retelling can simplify a practice or mistake one family's habit for a national rule. Learners need room to speak in their own voice, but they also need evidence, qualification, and feedback. Dialogue is not the abandonment of knowledge; it is a different way of putting knowledge to work.

3.Practical Challenges in Integrating Chinese Food Culture into International Chinese Language Education

The availability of food-related material does not guarantee a workable course. Teachers may have menus, recipes, documentary clips, festival customs, and restaurant stories, yet still lack a principle for selecting and sequencing them. Current practice reveals four recurring problems. They overlap, but they are not identical: materials may be plentiful while sequencing is weak; activities may be lively while interpretation is thin; and learners may understand a concept without being able to explain it. Research on the high-quality development of International Chinese Language Education has similarly identified resource systems, curriculum provision, and cultural communication capacity as areas that need further improvement [6].

3.1. Fragmented Language Resources and the Absence of Curricular Integration

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Food appears often in textbooks, but seldom as a continuing line of study. A vocabulary list may introduce vegetables in one unit; a later dialogue uses Kung Pao Chicken; dumplings return in a Spring Festival lesson; the Manchu-Han Imperial Feast appears in an advanced reading. Each item serves the immediate lesson, yet learners are rarely shown how these materials relate or what larger understanding they are building.

The fragmentation partly follows syllabus design. Ordering food is classified as an everyday function, while the Spring Festival belongs to the category of traditional festivals. Regional cuisine may appear under cultural geography, and diet-related ideas under health. Such placement is understandable from the viewpoint of topics. From the learner's viewpoint, however, food culture is broken into pieces. Ingredients, cooking methods, family customs, regional environments, and health beliefs rarely meet in the same conceptual line.

Progression across levels is also unstable. Beginners usually learn menu terms, prices, and preferences. Intermediate learners may meet the "eight major cuisines" or seasonal foods. Advanced classes sometimes discuss health, aesthetics, or social values. This looks like progression, but it often depends on the interests of a teacher or the contents of a particular textbook. One program may repeat restaurant language several times while another moves quickly to abstract cultural concepts.

The absence of a shared sequence also affects teachers. A new teacher may collect materials lesson by lesson, choosing whatever fits the current unit, while an experienced teacher relies on personal notes developed over years. Both approaches can produce strong individual classes, but the knowledge remains difficult to transfer across courses. When students change levels or institutions, teachers cannot easily know what cultural language has already been introduced or how deeply it was understood.

The result is uneven accumulation. Learners remember dish names or short anecdotes, but cannot explain how geography affects ingredients, how techniques become customs, or how meals express relationships. The central shortage is not content. It is a curricular mechanism for selecting, grading, connecting, and interpreting the content already available [7].

A further consequence is that assessment rarely captures growth over time. If food vocabulary is tested only in the unit where it first appears, learners have little incentive to connect it with later cultural work. Portfolio tasks, recurring questions, or short reflective notes could make accumulation more visible, even when formal examinations remain unchanged.

3.2. Excessive Display of Cultural Symbols and Insufficient Interpretation of Cultural Meanings

Dumpling-making, mooncake workshops, tea performances, and food festivals are popular because they are visible, enjoyable, and easy to organize as cultural events. They can reduce initial distance and allow beginners to participate with limited Chinese. Yet success is often measured through attendance, photographs, and finished products rather than through what learners can explain afterwards.

A student may remember that folding dumplings was difficult. Another may call a tea performance elegant. These impressions are genuine, but they do not necessarily explain why making dumplings together strengthens their festive meaning or why tea may express hospitality, respect, restraint, or social distance. The activity

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answers “What is this?” more readily than “Why does it matter?”

Symbols become especially thin when separated from their social setting. A round mooncake may be introduced as a symbol of reunion. If teaching stops there, “roundness equals reunion” becomes another test item. Its meaning is clearer when learners consider the family gathering, gift exchange, seasonal timing, and expectation that absent relatives should be remembered. Food-culture research likewise suggests that food symbols support understanding only when they are placed in the wider network of social relations and values that gives them meaning [8].

Assessment often reinforces the shallow approach. It is easy to ask which food belongs to a festival or where a dish originated. It is much harder to assess whether learners can explain why a meal matters, distinguish regional variation, or interpret a practice without stereotyping. Recognition and recall fit standard tests; interpretation requires time, comparison, and judgment. Under these conditions, cultural display remains convenient while deeper explanation is postponed.

Teacher explanation can also become too complete. When every meaning is supplied in advance, learners have little reason to notice, question, or interpret. A more productive activity might present two accounts of the same food custom, ask learners what each account leaves out, and then return to the object or event. Interpretation is not simply more information. It is the work of relating information to context and testing whether the relation makes sense.

3.3. The Proliferation of Activity-Based Experiences and the Lack of Sustained Practice Systems

Food activities are commonly arranged around the calendar. Mooncakes appear before the Mid-Autumn Festival, dumplings before the Spring Festival, and a food fair near the end of term. These events should not be dismissed. For some learners, they provide the first chance to touch unfamiliar ingredients or participate in a practice previously seen only in pictures.

The weakness lies before and after the event. Learners may enter a cooking room without knowing why the activity was selected, what language they should use, or what cultural question they should notice. They follow the demonstration, eat the result, and leave. The next class starts a new topic. No journal, discussion, or later task requires them to reuse the words or interpret the experience.

A sustained practice system would connect preparation, participation, and reflection. Beforehand, students might read a short recipe or predict what will be difficult. During the activity, they could record verbs used by the instructor or note how work is divided. Afterwards, they might write a process log, compare the practice with one from home, or explain it to an overseas audience. In many programs, these links are absent.

There are practical reasons. Short-term programs leave little time for long projects, and food work requires venues, ingredients, funds, equipment, and safety arrangements. Institutional expectations also matter. Experiential learning is often treated as extracurricular entertainment rather than as a place where language and cultural understanding are deliberately developed. A paradox follows: the bodily, participatory quality that makes food pedagogically distinctive is often the least systematically used part of the curriculum.

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Learner differences complicate the arrangement further. Religious restrictions, allergies, vegetarian diets, unfamiliar equipment, or anxiety about handling food can affect participation. A practice-based course must offer meaningful alternatives rather than assume that everyone can taste or cook the same item. Observation, interviewing, photographing a process, or documenting language can provide other forms of involvement. These choices require planning, which is another reason one-off events often remain easier than sustained work.

3.4. Growing Demands for International Communication and the Gap in Intercultural Expression

Chinese food circulates internationally through documentaries, restaurants, online video, and everyday encounters. The Li Ziqi phenomenon is one visible example of how cooking, rural life, craft, and images of China can travel together. International Chinese Language Education is increasingly expected to contribute to this communication, and food seems accessible because a dish or cooking process can be approached without extensive prior knowledge.

Difficulty emerges when learners try to explain meanings that do not travel easily. Expressions such as yanhuoqi, renqingwei, and yaoshi tongyuan carry more than their individual words. A literal version of yanhuoqi as “fire-and-smoke atmosphere” may be grammatically possible but fails to convey the warmth, noise, everyday human presence, and sense of lived community often associated with the expression.

Teachers may avoid such terms or replace them with long abstract explanations. The first response removes an important part of food culture; the second can strip away the ordinary scene that made the term meaningful. Learners need examples, comparisons, and short narratives, not translation alone. Yaoshi tongyuan, for instance, may become more accessible if an explanation begins with a family preparing soup or ginger tea for someone who is unwell.

A second difficulty concerns the learner’s role. In many classes, cultural communication still moves from teacher to student. Learners watch a demonstration, read a note, and answer comprehension questions. Actual intercultural communication is less predictable. The speaker has to decide which details matter, anticipate misunderstanding, and select a comparison that clarifies without distorting.

International learners occupy a useful middle position. They are neither original bearers of Chinese culture nor complete outsiders. Because they have experienced confusion and partial understanding, they may know where an overseas listener will hesitate. Yet they receive few structured opportunities to practise retelling cultural meanings. Helping them move from audiences of culture to “narrators” of culture remains a significant curricular task.

Translation training should therefore include audience testing. A learner may prepare an explanation of renqingwei that sounds clear in class but confuses a friend who has never lived in China. Asking that friend what remains unclear produces useful evidence. The learner can then replace an abstract definition with a scene, add a contrast, or remove an assumption. Through revision, intercultural expression becomes a practical skill rather than a final performance.

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4.Practical Pathways for Integrating Chinese Food Culture into International Chinese Language Education

The problem is not a lack of material. It is the unfinished work of turning material into a connected course. A video shown once, a festival activity without follow-up, or a cultural term that learners never use again does not accumulate into curriculum. The following framework links four dimensions: language, cognition, experience, and communication. They are separated for analysis, but in teaching they should overlap. Learners may encounter an expression in a text, use it in an activity, reconsider its meaning afterwards, and finally explain it to another audience. The sequence may begin elsewhere, and not every lesson needs all four dimensions. What matters is that a course creates returns and links rather than a succession of unrelated cultural moments.

4.1. The Linguistic Dimension: From Dispersed Materials to Systematic Resources

Food-related language should not be selected only because a teacher finds an attractive video or an interesting story. Two questions come first. What can learners at this stage understand and use? How does the material connect with earlier learning and prepare for later work?

One line of organization concerns linguistic difficulty. Beginners need language for unavoidable situations: reading a simple menu, asking a price, expressing a preference, mentioning an allergy, or checking whether a dish contains a particular ingredient. Lists of nouns are not enough. A learner who knows the word for peanuts still needs a clear sentence that can be used quickly when ordering.

Intermediate learners can work with longer exchanges. They may compare regional flavors, describe a cooking process, ask how a dish is prepared, or discuss seasonal customs. At this stage, language moves from immediate survival toward description, comparison, and short explanation. Advanced learners can approach condensed expressions such as eating according to the season, medicine and food sharing the same origin, and coarse tea and simple meals. These should not be treated as items for translation alone. Teachers can ask where an expression would be appropriate, what assumptions it carries, and where a comparison with another language becomes misleading.

A second line of organization concerns cultural depth. Teaching may begin with ingredients because they can be seen and named, then move to cooking methods, eating practices, dining etiquette, and dietary ideas. This is not a rigid order for every lesson. Still, the sequence offers a way of showing how food culture extends from visible materials to less visible meanings [9]. The same topic can return at different levels. A beginner orders tea; an intermediate learner describes brewing; an advanced learner discusses how serving tea changes with occasion and relationship.

Discourse resources also need greater variety. Textbook dialogues are useful because they control difficulty, but learners should also encounter menus, recipes, online reviews, spoken documentary passages, interviews, and family accounts. Such materials contain hesitation, local vocabulary, personal memory, and differences in tone. Adaptation should make them teachable without polishing away every trace of actual use.

Resources are more useful when they lead into one another. A documentary extract may prepare learners

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for a field visit; notes from the visit can become a presentation; a regional-cuisine unit can end with a learner-made food guide. Textbooks, courses, activities, and communication tasks should therefore be designed as related resources rather than as separate products, a direction consistent with broader calls for integrated innovation in International Chinese Language Education [7].

Pragmatic instruction deserves special attention. Dining-table language depends on relationship and timing. Learners may know how to say "I do not want it" but not how to soften the refusal when a host offers food. A short role play can make the problem visible: one learner hosts, another has a dietary restriction, a third arrives late, and someone dislikes a dish but does not want to embarrass the host. Discussion after the role play can focus on which wording worked and why. In this way, grammar is connected with social judgment.

A modest resource bank can support this progression. Materials need not be large or technically complex. Each item can record its language level, likely cultural difficulty, possible task, and connection with earlier units. A restaurant review, for example, may first support adjectives of taste, later serve as evidence in a discussion of consumer expectations, and finally become a model for a learner-written review. Reuse makes the resource curricular rather than disposable.

4.2. The Cognitive Dimension: From Fragmented Knowledge to Systematic Construction

More cultural facts do not necessarily produce better understanding. A learner may remember that mooncakes are eaten during the Mid-Autumn Festival and that Sichuan cuisine is often spicy, yet remain unable to connect these facts or apply the same questions to an unfamiliar practice. Cognitive work should therefore provide a reusable way of thinking.

A useful framework begins with ordinary questions: Where does a practice come from? What material conditions support it? Who takes part? When does it occur? What relationship or value does it express? These questions can be activated again when learners meet a dish not covered in class.

Dumplings show how a cognitive chain can work. Teaching may begin with wheat cultivation in northern China, move to wrapper and filling techniques, then consider festival use and the social scene of family members preparing food together. Every link need not become a historical lecture. The point is to show that a dish is connected with environment, technique, ritual, labor, and family life.

This approach also prevents culture from becoming a simple symbolic equation. Saying that dumplings represent reunion is useful but incomplete. Learners can ask why making them together matters, whether every family shares the same interpretation, and what changes when frozen dumplings replace home preparation. Meaning is maintained through practice, but it can also be adjusted.

Time and place add another layer. Seasonal expressions such as eating sprouts in spring and roots in winter reveal a way of relating diet to environmental rhythm. They should not be presented as rules followed uniformly by everyone. Contemporary supply, migration, work patterns, health, and regional habit all affect actual meals. The value of such expressions lies in the reasoning they reveal.

Spatial diversity is equally important. Sichuan, Cantonese, and Huaiyang food traditions have been shaped by different climates, products, histories, trade routes, and patterns of migration. A food map should therefore

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do more than attach famous dishes to provinces. Learners can compare where ingredients grow, how transport changed availability, and how flavors moved with people.

Intercultural comparison supports this cognitive work when it starts with something specific. A learner may think, "We have a meal a little like this." The teacher can then ask where the resemblance ends. Family meals may differ in seating, service, and expectations, yet still confirm intimate relationships. Hospitality rules vary, but food is widely used to express attention or respect. Comparison is a temporary bridge, not a final conclusion.

Teachers can make the framework visible by asking learners to draw a small "meaning map" for one food. At the center is the dish; around it are ingredients, place, season, labor, social occasion, and personal memory. Two maps will rarely be identical. The differences show that cultural meaning has a structure but not a single mechanical formula. They also prevent learners from assuming that every Chinese person relates to a symbol in the same way.

4.3. The Experiential Dimension: From One-Off Activities to Sustained Embodied Practice

A cooking activity becomes part of a course only when it is connected with learning before and after the event. Making hand-pulled noodles for an afternoon may be memorable, but the activity alone does not ensure that learners understand the language of the process, the local history of the food, or the skill involved. Sustained bodily participation and situated practice can support cognitive development in ways consistent with embodied cognition theory [5].

Project-based learning offers one workable arrangement. A class might spend several weeks on wheat-based food, tea culture, or a local food tradition. The project need not be large. What matters is that learners return to the same topic through different tasks.

For hand-pulled noodles, students could first identify verbs for kneading, stretching, folding, and pulling. They might then observe a cook, record questions, and attempt a simplified practical task. Afterwards, they could compare their observations with regional information, write a process log, and explain one technique to classmates. Language, action, and interpretation occur at different moments but remain connected.

Teaching can also move across classroom, campus, and community. The classroom prepares vocabulary and questions. Campus food clubs or shared kitchens offer a semi-controlled place to practise. Markets, restaurants, and street-food stalls reveal living language that cannot be fully simulated. Yet a visit is not automatically educational. Learners need a purpose: an item to compare, a conversation to observe with permission, or a question to report on later.

Food broadens the sensory range of language learning. Reading and listening remain necessary, but taste, smell, touch, texture, and movement add another kind of evidence. After tasting tea, learners often say only that it is good or bitter. Teachers can push the response further: Does the bitterness arrive immediately? What changes after swallowing? Which word best describes the aroma? Such questions turn sensation into language and interpretation.

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Digital technology can extend access where physical experience is limited. The digital and intelligent transformation of International Chinese Language Education has created new possibilities for cultural learning [10]. A virtual market can allow learners to inspect products and complete a purchasing task; a digital kitchen can slow down a cooking process; an interactive food map can connect flavor with geography and migration. These experiences are repeatable and easy to pause, but they cannot reproduce smell, taste, or spontaneous social interaction. Their strongest use is complementary rather than substitutive.

A sustained design therefore connects preparation, action, and return. Learners read before doing, use language while doing, and interpret afterwards. The body does not enter the curriculum for one afternoon and then disappear. Experience becomes material that later lessons can question, revise, and communicate.

Reflection need not take the form of a long essay. A photograph with a short caption, a list of expressions heard during the activity, or a two-minute audio note can preserve details while they are fresh. Later, learners can return to the record and notice what they missed. This small archive is especially useful in short programs, where a full project may be unrealistic but continuity can still be created across several lessons.

4.4. The Communicative Dimension: From One-Way Presentation to Dialogic Intercultural Expression

Food-culture teaching often follows an "I tell you" pattern: the teacher explains a dish, learners listen, and a comprehension exercise checks recall. This model can transmit information, but cultural courses should also help learners express meanings and take part in communication across cultural boundaries [11]. The ability to understand an explanation is not the same as the ability to produce one.

Comparison works differently at the communicative level. During learning, it helps students make sense of something unfamiliar. During communication, it helps them make that idea accessible to another person. The speaker must judge what the audience already knows, which detail matters, and which analogy clarifies rather than distorts.

Yaoshi tongyuan provides an example. A direct translation, "medicine and food share a common origin," may remain abstract. A learner could begin with a familiar scene: a family prepares chicken soup, ginger tea, or another food when someone is unwell. The example opens a channel without claiming that the practices are identical. The learner can then explain how the Chinese idea is broader and where the comparison stops.

Yanhuoqi and renqingwei require similar narrative judgment. A dictionary equivalent is unlikely to be enough. Learners may need to describe a street at dinner time, the sound of cooking, people talking outside small restaurants, or the feeling that ordinary life is visibly taking place. A short scene can carry what an abstract definition misses.

Learners should gradually move from cultural recipients to cultural narrators. This role change is consistent with current efforts to coordinate International Chinese Language Education with international communication [12]. "Narrator" does not mean official spokesperson. Learners can identify what they observed, state where their information came from, compare it with their own experience, and acknowledge what they do not yet understand.

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Short videos, blog posts, podcasts, and food guides provide practical formats. A video titled “Chinese dumplings in my eyes” could require learners to explain one step of preparation, one social meaning, and one comparison with a food from home. A podcast might bring together two learners to discuss hospitality through food. Classmates can then identify which explanations were clear, which assumed too much knowledge, and which examples created stereotypes.

Assessment should reflect this work. Accuracy remains necessary, but it is not the only criterion. Teachers can also consider whether the explanation suits its audience, whether examples clarify the concept, whether internal cultural diversity is acknowledged, and whether the learner can respond to questions. Communication becomes a form of inquiry because failed explanations expose gaps in understanding.

Audience and ethics also deserve attention. Filming a market vendor or posting a family meal online involves consent and representation, not only language practice. Learners should distinguish public information from private interaction and avoid turning people into decorative evidence of “authentic culture.” A well-designed task makes these decisions explicit. Responsible communication is part of intercultural competence, not an optional addition to it.

Revision should also be built into the task. Learners can present a first explanation to classmates, receive questions, check the cultural claim, and produce a second version for a different audience. The difference between the two versions gives teachers evidence of learning that a one-time presentation cannot provide.

The four dimensions meet in this process. Language supplies the means of expression. Cognitive work organizes meaning. Experience provides something concrete to interpret. Communication tests whether that understanding can travel beyond the original classroom. None of these connections occurs automatically; they depend on deliberate course design.

5.Conclusions

Chinese food is already visible in many language classrooms, but visibility should not be confused with curricular integration. A menu dialogue, a dumpling activity, or a short note on tea may be useful in itself and still remain disconnected from later learning. This article has examined how food culture can become a sustained curricular resource rather than a sequence of attractive but isolated moments.

Its educational value lies in the links it can create. Food places vocabulary and pragmatic choice in recognizable situations. Shared meals offer concrete material for intercultural comparison. Cooking and tasting bring the body into a classroom usually organized around reading and listening. Stories, customs, and culturally condensed expressions also give learners material that can be retold to people outside the classroom.

Current practice only partly realizes this potential. Resources are scattered, symbols are often displayed without sufficient interpretation, activities end without reflection, and learners receive more cultural information than they are asked to communicate. The proposed language-cognition-experience-communication framework addresses these gaps by treating linguistic grading, cultural interpretation, embodied practice, and dialogic expression as parts of one process.

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The framework is not a fixed sequence for every lesson. A course may begin with a restaurant dialogue, a field visit, a family story, or a cultural term. What matters is that the material returns. Learners should meet it again through another task, another level of language, or another audience. Repetition in this sense is not duplication; it is deepening. A word first used to order food may later appear in a story about migration; a festival dish first tasted in class may return in a discussion of family change. Each return alters what the learner can see and say.

Chinese food culture becomes a curricular resource when its language is organized, its meanings are questioned, its practices are experienced, and its stories are retold. The central task is not to add more food-related content. It is to make the content already present accumulate into knowledge that learners can use, interpret, and communicate across cultural boundaries. In practical terms, this means fewer isolated "cultural moments" and more carefully connected returns. A small number of well-developed food topics may be more educationally valuable than a long list of dishes, festivals, and customs encountered only once.

The framework also leaves room for local adaptation. A program in China may draw on markets, restaurants, and community visits, while an overseas course may depend more heavily on family interviews, local Chinese restaurants, digital materials, or foods available in the learners' own city. These conditions will shape the form of experience, but they do not alter the underlying requirement: language, interpretation, participation, and communication should support one another. The same principle applies to assessment. Evidence of learning may appear in a role play, a revised explanation, a process log, or a comparison produced after an activity; no single format is mandatory. Future classroom-based research can test how these connections work with different learner groups and course lengths. The present discussion provides a curricular direction rather than a single teaching formula.

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