

Integrating Thai Local Culture into Chinese Culture Courses in Chiang Mai: A Framework–Guided Study

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Abstract

This article aimed to (1) examine the current teaching status and materials used in Chinese culture courses, (2) explore students' interests and learning needs, (3) assess the integration of Chiang Mai's local culture into teaching practices, and (4) analyze teacher and student attitudes toward cultural localization. A descriptive quantitative design was adopted. Data were collected from 11 Chinese culture teachers and 228 undergraduate students across four universities through validated questionnaires (IOC = 0.85–1.00, Cronbach's α = 0.806). Results show that 91.4% of teachers rely on officially published textbooks, yet fewer than half of students find them locally relevant. Both groups strongly support the incorporation of local cultural resources—festivals, cuisine, and community heritage—into classroom activities. More than 95% of students reported greater motivation and more profound understanding through comparative and experiential learning. Teachers, however, face constraints in time, training, and institutional support. The study proposes a Three–Level Cultural Integration Model—perception, comparison, and integration—as a framework for designing localized and intercultural curricula. The findings offer practical strategies for curriculum reform and contribute to the sustainable development of Chinese culture education in Thai higher education.

Keywords: framework of reference; curriculum localization; local cultural resources; intercultural education; Chinese culture teaching; Chiang Mai higher education

Introduction

In recent years, Chinese language and culture education has expanded rapidly across Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, where interest in Chinese studies has grown alongside China's deepening cooperation with ASEAN countries under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese language courses are now offered at numerous primary, secondary, and higher education institutions throughout the country, supported by the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation. This expansion reflects Thailand's position as one of the most active centres for international Chinese education outside China, highlighting the need to strengthen both linguistic and cultural competence in teaching practice.

However, despite this growth, many universities still rely on officially published Chinese cultural textbooks designed for general international learners. As a result, students often perceive a gap between classroom content and their lived cultural experiences. Previous research (Tan, 2016; Mo, 2022; Xu et al., 2024) has identified challenges, including limited teacher preparation for intercultural pedagogy, insufficient use of local cultural resources, and the dominance of one-way cultural transmission over mutual cultural dialogue. This situation raises a critical question: How can instruction in Chinese culture be effectively localized to better connect with Thai learners' contexts while maintaining academic integrity and cultural authenticity?

To address these challenges, the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) released The Framework of Reference for Chinese Culture and Society in International Chinese Language Education in 2022, providing systematic guidance for cultural and contextual adaptation in international Chinese education. The Framework organizes Chinese culture into three broad domains—social life, traditional culture, and contemporary China—and encourages comparative, experiential, and localized teaching approaches. Nevertheless, few empirical studies have applied this Framework to Southeast Asian contexts, where teachers and students negotiate diverse identities and learning environments.

Chiang Mai, a city renowned for its multicultural heritage and a strong Chinese community, offers an ideal setting for exploring this issue. It hosts multiple universities with Chinese departments and abundant local cultural resources, such as traditional festivals, ancestral temples, markets, and bilingual communities, which provide authentic materials for instruction in Chinese

culture. However, systematic research on how these resources are integrated into university curricula remains limited.

By combining the theoretical foundation of the Framework with empirical evidence from universities in Chiang Mai, this study seeks to provide pedagogical insights and policy recommendations to promote localized, intercultural, and meaningful Chinese cultural education in Thai higher education.

Research Objectives

1. To study the current teaching status and the use of teaching materials in Chinese culture courses at universities in Chiang Mai.
2. To study students' interests and learning needs regarding Chinese culture courses.
3. To study the integration and actual effectiveness of Chiang Mai's local cultural resources in Chinese culture teaching.
4. To study the attitudes and challenges of teachers and students toward culturally integrated teaching.

Literature Review

The Need for Localization in International Chinese Culture Education

With the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese language and culture education has developed rapidly across Asia, particularly in Thailand. However, scholars have noted that the predominant model of cultural instruction still follows a unidirectional transmission approach, often disconnected from students' local contexts. Tan (2016) and Mo (2022) observe that the lack of local relevance in curricula and teaching materials reduces student motivation and learning effectiveness. Xu (2021) and Qin et al. (2024) further suggest that comparative and contextualized learning strategies should be incorporated to promote intercultural understanding and practical engagement. Despite these recommendations, most existing research remains at the policy or conceptual level, and few empirical studies examine how localization is implemented in specific university settings such as Chiang Mai. This highlights the urgent need for empirical evidence linking international Chinese education theories with local pedagogical practice.

Current Research on Curriculum and Pedagogical Practices

Studies on the localization of Chinese culture teaching have mainly focused on two dimensions: curriculum content and teaching methods.

The first dimension relates to curriculum and textbook design. Zhan (2013) and Qiu and Wang (2017) found that most Chinese culture courses for international students rely on generalized and thematic textbooks that lack specialization and local adaptability. Textbook content is often comprehensive but fails to reflect the socio-cultural contexts of target learners.

The second dimension addresses teaching methods and classroom strategies. Lin (1996), Yang (2011), and Chen (2011) advocate experiential and context-based approaches, including comparative analysis, role-play, and project-based activities, to deepen students' understanding and engagement. Kao-ien and Imsaran (2023) extend this discussion to Thai universities, emphasizing that teaching effectiveness depends on classroom interaction, teacher competence, and student readiness.

Although these studies have made valuable contributions, they tend to examine either curriculum design or pedagogical practice in isolation. Few attempts are made to integrate local cultural resources into curriculum content while simultaneously addressing teaching strategies. This fragmentation reveals a methodological gap between curriculum reform and local implementation.

The Framework of Reference and the Remaining Gaps

The publication of The Framework of Reference for Chinese Culture and Society in International Chinese Language Education (Zu, 2022) offers a new theoretical tool for localization and curriculum evaluation. The Framework classifies Chinese culture into the domains of social life, traditional culture, and contemporary China, and provides a scientific basis for curriculum design and teacher training (Li & Guo, 2024; Wu, 2022). Zu (2023) emphasizes that it bridges cultural knowledge and intercultural communication competence, guiding the development of international Chinese education.

Nevertheless, most studies concerning the Framework remain theoretical and focus on interpretation rather than empirical validation. There is still little evidence on how the Framework can be applied to localized curriculum design and instruction in Southeast Asian contexts such as Thailand. Moreover, existing research often examines teachers or students independently, without a comparative perspective that links both sides of the teaching-learning process.

In summary, current literature reveals three main gaps: (1) a lack of empirical research on localization practices in specific regions like Chiang Mai. (2) a scarcity of studies that apply the 2022 Framework as an evaluation model for Chinese culture courses in Thai higher education. (3) a limited integration of teacher and student perspectives in the same analytical framework. To address these gaps, the present study adopts the Framework as its theoretical basis. It conducts an empirical investigation of teachers and students at Chiang Mai universities to enhance the local adaptability and effectiveness of Chinese culture instruction.

Research Conceptual Framework

The researcher has defined the research conceptual framework based on the theories of The Framework of Reference for Chinese Culture and Society in International Chinese Language Education (Zu, 2022), supported by Intercultural Education and Localization in Education, with details as follows:

1. Core Theoretical Basis – The Framework of Reference

The Framework of Reference provides the first systematic model for cultural teaching in international Chinese language education. It classifies Chinese culture into major domains, including social life, traditional culture, and contemporary China, thereby providing a structured framework for curriculum development. This study employs the framework to analyze course design, textbook content, and students' engagement in Chinese culture courses.

2. Supporting Theory I – Intercultural Education

Intercultural education (Byram, 2021) emphasizes learners' cultural awareness and adaptability in multicultural contexts. It guides this study in evaluating whether comparisons of Chinese and Thai cultures, teachers' instructional design, and classroom materials enhance students' intercultural understanding and communication competence.

3. Supporting Theory II – Localization in Education

Drawing from curriculum localization theory (Bray & Thomas, 1995), the study integrates local cultural resources from Chiang Mai into Chinese culture teaching. It examines the extent and methods of such integration, as well as how students perceive and respond to localized content.

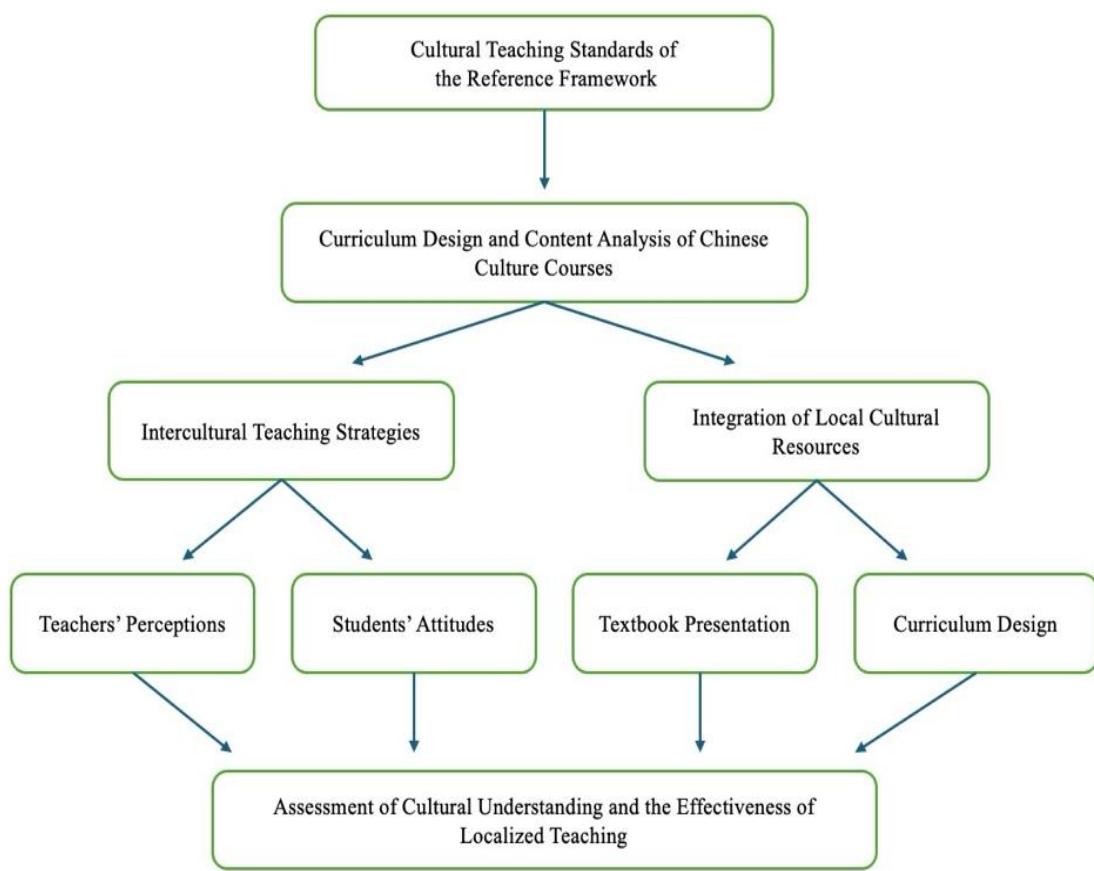


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This research is a quantitative descriptive study. The research area comprises four universities in Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, that offer degree programs in Chinese. The study aims to examine the current conditions, challenges, and potential of integrating Thai local cultural resources into Chinese culture courses under the Framework of Reference for Chinese Culture and Society in International Chinese Language Education (Zu, 2022). The population consists of two groups: (1). teachers who teach Chinese culture-related courses and (2). Thai undergraduate students majoring in Chinese.

The total population is 448 persons, obtained through online interviews with lecturers and program coordinators from the four universities, as no official data were publicly available. The sample includes 11 teachers (census method) and 228 students, determined using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The selection method was

stratified convenience sampling, with each university considered one stratum. Participants were selected conveniently within each stratum until sufficient data were collected.

The research instruments used in this study are of a single type: a questionnaire developed in two versions (teacher and student). The questionnaires consist of both closed-ended and open-ended items based on the Framework of Reference. The instruments include five components: (1). course content and textbook use. (2). student interest in social life, traditional culture, and contemporary China. (3). teaching methods and learning resources. (4). awareness and attitudes toward integrating local cultural resources. (5). perceived effectiveness, challenges, and suggestions. The instrument's reliability and validity were assessed through expert review and pilot testing. Three experts in international Chinese education and Thai cultural studies assessed content validity using the Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) method, yielding values ranging from 0.85 to 1.00. A pilot test involving 30 non-sampled students produced a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.806, indicating satisfactory reliability. The questionnaire was used to examine teachers' and students' current practices and perceptions regarding the teaching of localized Chinese culture. No interviews or focus group discussions were conducted in this study, as the research relied exclusively on quantitative data collection via structured questionnaires. Data were collected between January and February 2025 through classroom-based and online surveys. All returned questionnaires were verified, coded, and analyzed using statistical software. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to answer the four research objectives: (1) current curriculum and materials, (2) student learning interests and needs. (3) integration and effectiveness of local cultural resources. (4). teacher and student perceptions and challenges toward localized instruction.

Research Result

Objective 1. The research results found that most universities (91.4%) use officially published Chinese culture textbooks, while some supplement them with self-compiled or online resources. Although 92.76% of students considered the textbook content rich and valuable, fewer than half (44.79%) believed it adequately represented local cultural elements. Similarly, 81.82% of teachers used official textbooks but felt that they lacked cultural relevance for Thai learners. These findings indicate that, although teaching materials are generally standardized, they require adaptation to include localized and comparative content that reflects the cultural contexts of China and Thailand.

Objective 2. The research results found that students showed diverse interests across the three thematic areas defined in The Framework of Reference for Chinese Culture and Society in International Chinese Language Education. Topics related to social life—language, communication styles, and daily customs—generated the highest interest, suggesting students' desire to connect language learning with real-life experiences. Interest in traditional culture was moderate, with greater emphasis on practical, globally relevant topics such as inventions and cultural exchange rather than on abstract content such as philosophy or religion. In contemporary China, language, education, and media were most favored, while politics was least appealing. Overall, students preferred interactive, technology-based, and comparative learning approaches and expressed strong expectations for greater inclusion of Thai cultural resources.

Objective 3. The research results found that both teachers and students strongly supported the integration of local cultural resources into Chinese culture courses. More than 95% of students expressed interest in incorporating Thai cultural content and cross-cultural comparisons. Teachers also recognized the potential of Chiang Mai's local culture—such as food traditions, festivals, and historical landmarks—as valuable teaching resources. However, they reported challenges, including limited teaching time, insufficient funding, and inadequate institutional guidance. Despite these constraints, more than 70% of teachers reported that integrating local culture was “very effective” in enhancing student engagement, motivation, and intercultural understanding.

Objective 4. The research found that 95.47% of students agreed that integrating local culture helped them better understand Chinese culture, and 98.2% reported that it increased their interest in learning and cultural awareness. Teachers shared positive attitudes, emphasizing the benefits of intercultural competence and student participation. However, both groups identified key challenges: insufficient teaching resources, lack of policy-level support, and limited opportunities for experiential learning. Teachers suggested strengthening multimedia and interactive methods—such as situational simulation and local fieldwork—to promote more engaging, comparative, and sustainable cultural instruction.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the current state, opportunities, and challenges of teaching Chinese culture in higher education institutions in Chiang Mai. Three key discussions are presented as follows.

The “Standardization” of Textbooks and the “Disconnection” from Local Needs

The first significant finding indicates that teaching practice remains highly dependent on officially published standardized textbooks, with 91.4% of teachers using such materials as the primary source of instruction. This empirically confirms the earlier observations of Qiu & Wang (2017) that the content of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) culture textbooks tends to be generalized and homogeneous.

However, the present study advances their argument by identifying a significant perceptual gap between teachers' textbook choices and students' local learning needs. Only 44.79% of students agreed that the current textbooks adequately reflect local cultural elements. This disconnection suggests that the existing model of “one-way cultural transmission” (Mo, 2022) fails to meet Thai students' expectations for “two-way cultural dialogue.” The result highlights a crucial pedagogical issue: the lack of contextual relevance weakens students' perceived learning effectiveness and engagement.

Students' “High Demand” versus Teachers' “Supply-Side Constraints”

Students' strong preference for practical, relatable topics underscores a learning orientation driven by everyday applicability and future employability. Their low engagement with abstract or political content suggests a mismatch between curriculum design and learners' cognitive and linguistic readiness. This finding supports the argument that cultural courses should shift from knowledge transmission to learner-centered, experience-based teaching. Incorporating multimedia, simulations, and project-based learning could enhance motivation and make abstract cultural concepts more accessible.

Localization and Teacher Challenges

The second key finding reveals that students show overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward localization and comparative learning approaches. More than 95% of students believe that integrating local cultural content increases both motivation and comprehension. This aligns with the experiential and situational learning theories advocated by Lin (1996) and Yang (2011), which emphasize learning through participation, context, and meaningful interaction.

However, a deeper analysis reveals a paradox. Although teachers recognize the value of localization, they face significant supply-side constraints—limited time, inadequate training, and insufficient institutional support. These barriers resonate with Kao-ien and Imsaran (2023), who identified teacher competency as a decisive factor influencing classroom effectiveness. The present

study extends this perspective by demonstrating that such limitations are not rooted in teachers' attitudes but rather in structural challenges embedded in the current institutional framework. Therefore, improving localization requires not only teacher awareness but also systemic policy and administrative support.

The Emerging Need for an Operational Framework

Synthesizing the above findings, this study identifies a central tension between the demand and supply sides of localized Chinese cultural education. On the demand side, students expect more localized and comparative cultural content; on the supply side, teachers struggle to meet those expectations due to limited pedagogical guidance and resource support. This imbalance suggests that rhetorical calls for localization are insufficient without practical mechanisms for implementation.

Hence, the findings underscore an urgent need for an operational and systematic framework to bridge this gap. Such a framework should translate The Framework of Reference for Chinese Culture and Society in International Chinese Language Education (Zu, 2022) from a macro-level guideline into micro-level classroom practice, offering teachers clear models, instructional materials, and evaluation tools to achieve meaningful localization. This transformation would not only strengthen teaching effectiveness but also contribute to the sustainable development of international Chinese culture education in Thailand.

New knowledge from research

To address the “demand–supply imbalance” identified in the Discussion and to directly respond to the needs of both teachers and students reflected in the Results, this study proposes a Three–Level Cultural Integration Model. The model is grounded in The Framework of Reference for Chinese Culture and Society in International Chinese Language Education (Zu, 2022) and is empirically informed by the quantitative findings of this research. It provides a practical pathway for implementing the teaching of Chinese culture in Thai higher education.

1. Perception Layer: Introducing cultural elements through multimedia and experiential activities to arouse curiosity and build motivation.
2. Comparison Layer: Encouraging learners to compare Chinese and Thai cultures to foster reflection, intercultural understanding, and tolerance.
3. Integration Layer: Applying Chinese cultural knowledge through local Thai contexts—festivals, heritage, and bilingual materials—to enhance real–world communication skills.

Empirical Validation of the “Three-Level Cultural Integration Model”

Based on teacher and student feedback, the model has demonstrated partial empirical support. The following table summarizes its validation across dimensions:

Level	Teaching Strategies	Supporting Data	Observed Effect
Perception	Introducing Thai local culture to spark interest (e.g., Songkran vs. Spring Festival)	Over 95% of students expressed support for “local cultural integration”	Significant increase in student interest
Comparison	Organizing cultural comparison tasks	Most students wished to deepen understanding through comparison; teachers supported the idea but lacked resources	Improved understanding but constrained by resources
Integration	Designing blended instruction (e.g., Chinese-Thai festival reports, bilingual writing tasks)	A few teachers experimented with cross-cultural writing and student presentations	High potential, but weak implementation

Figure 2 Three-Level Cultural Integration Model

As illustrated in Figure 2, the proposed model offers a locally grounded, empirically supported, and operational framework for curriculum localization in Thai higher education. It bridges the gap between theory (the Framework) and classroom practice, providing teachers with a structured guide for designing, implementing, and evaluating intercultural learning activities. This model thus represents a context-sensitive contribution to the field of international Chinese culture education and a practical innovation for sustainable curriculum reform.

Conclusion

This study empirically establishes the current state of Chinese culture teaching in higher education institutions in Chiang Mai. The findings demonstrate a significant disconnection between standardized textbooks and local learning needs. While most teachers rely heavily on official materials, students perceive these resources as insufficiently aligned with their cultural contexts, revealing a structural imbalance between curriculum design and learner relevance.

To address this gap, the study’s core contribution lies in the construction and validation of the Three-Level Cultural Integration Model, which is elaborated in the New Knowledge from Research section. Grounded in The Framework of Reference for Chinese Culture and Society in

International Chinese Language Education (Zu, 2022), the model provides a systematic pathway for teachers to integrate Chinese cultural themes with local resources such as community heritage, festivals, and everyday practices in Chiang Mai. By moving beyond abstract calls for “localization,” the model offers operational teaching strategies and context-sensitive curriculum guidelines.

This study therefore provides not only empirical evidence but also policy and pedagogical recommendations for reforming Chinese culture courses in Thailand and the wider Southeast Asian region. It contributes a replicable and sustainable framework for developing an international Chinese education that is more inclusive, dialogical, and responsive to local cultural contexts.

Suggestions

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, this study proposes the following recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of Chinese culture instruction in Thai universities, particularly in Chiang Mai:

1. Strengthen Localization in Curriculum Design

Course materials and content should be better adapted to reflect Thai students’ cultural realities and learning needs. This includes: (1) Incorporating local cultural elements (e.g., Thai Chinese traditions, regional festivals, and belief systems). (2) Expanding comparative modules on Chinese and Thai cultural practices. (3). Revising reading materials and classroom activities to enhance cultural relevance and learner resonance. (4). Introducing intercultural observation assignments.

2. Enhance Experiential and Immersive Teaching

To foster authentic cultural understanding, teachers are encouraged to organize culturally immersive activities such as: (1) Simulations of traditional festivals. (2). Cultural visits during holidays. (3). Field trips to Chinatown, museums, and temples. (4). Culinary practice sessions that allow students to “experience culture firsthand,” thereby increasing classroom engagement and deepening cultural comprehension.

3. Diversify Teaching Methods

To stimulate student participation and support intercultural learning, instructors should: (1) Use multimedia resources, interactive simulations, and task-based scenarios. (2). Expand experiential and project-based learning practices, including field investigations, cultural event

participation, and student-led presentations. (3). Reduce reliance on lecture-based instruction and promote learner-centered approaches.

4. Enhance Teacher Training and Theoretical Guidance

It is essential to integrate the Framework of Reference for Chinese Culture and Society into teacher development programs to build capacity in culturally responsive course design. To overcome implementation barriers, institutions should: (1) Host training workshops on the application of the Framework and strategies for local cultural integration. (2). Establish shared databases of localized instructional resources. (3). Encourage interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty in Chinese, Thai Studies, and Education.

5. Advocate Institutional and Policy Support

Administrative and policy-level support is critical for the deep integration of local cultural content. Recommendations include: (1) Allocating funding for cultural teaching materials and immersive learning activities. (2). Supporting curriculum innovation projects that emphasize localization. (3). Including local cultural competence as part of faculty evaluation and course performance assessment systems.

Theoretical Contributions and Practical Significance

This study contributes to the field of international Chinese language education in the following ways:

1. Theoretical Contributions

(1). By applying the Framework of Reference for Chinese Culture and Society in International Chinese Language Education to evaluate localized curriculum practices, this study extends the framework's application from a theoretical model to an empirical research tool.

(2). It emphasizes the importance of linking cultural instruction with the lived experiences of local learners, thereby contributing to scholarly discussions on localized and interculturally responsive pedagogy in international Chinese education.

2. Practical Significance

(1). Grounded in empirical evidence, this study provides a deeper understanding of both student and teacher perspectives, offering practical references for curriculum development and teaching strategies.

(2). The study proposes feasible and context-sensitive approaches for integrating local cultural resources into Chinese culture instruction—particularly applicable in Southeast Asian contexts.

(3). It serves as a reference model for other intercultural education settings seeking to bridge national curriculum standards with local cultural identity and learner relevance.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, it also recognizes certain limitations and proposes directions for future research:

(1). Mixed-Methods Approach

This study primarily relied on quantitative questionnaire data. Future research could incorporate qualitative methods, such as interviews, classroom observations, and analyses of student work, to gain deeper insights into the processes and experiences of cultural learning.

(2). Expanded Geographic Scope

Future studies may extend the research scope to other regions of Thailand and conduct comparative analyses of how cultural integration in Chinese courses differs across regions and institutional contexts.

(3). Localized Textbook Development

Subsequent research could focus on textbook evaluation, combining discourse analysis with intercultural instructional design theories, to help establish a systematic model for developing localized teaching materials that better serve diverse student populations.

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