

Cultural Narratives on the Plate: A Semiotic Study of Food Design in Chinese and Thai Cross-Cultural Experiences

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Abstract

This study aims to examine cross-cultural food experiences by exploring how food design reflects cultural influence, shapes consumer preferences, and functions as a medium for cross-cultural communication. Specifically, the research investigates the role of cultural values in shaping food design practices in Chinese and Thai contexts, analyzes audience responses to food design elements, and examines how food design facilitates intercultural understanding.

A qualitative research approach was employed using comparative content analysis of selected Chinese and Thai food vlog materials. Video cases representing diverse food environments, including traditional markets, Chinatown settings, night markets, and street food contexts, were purposively selected. Audience interactions were further examined through viewer comments to understand how meanings are interpreted and negotiated in cross-cultural encounters. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to sensory presentation, cultural symbolism, and mediated engagement.

The findings reveal that cross-cultural food experience is a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of cultural narratives, sensory design, and social interpretation. Cultural values influence food design through symbolic and experiential elements, while consumer preferences are negotiated through emotional responses such as curiosity and trust. Food design also functions as a communicative interface that bridges cultural differences through sensory engagement and narrative framing.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Food Experience, Food Design, Cultural Communication, Sensory Engagement, Digital Audience Interaction

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Introduction

Food and culture are profoundly interconnected and continuously influence one another. Food is not merely a source of nutrition; it also functions as a cultural symbol that reflects the identity, history, and social values of a community (Counihan, C., & Van Esterik, P., 2013). The notion that “food is a language of culture” suggests that food serves as an effective medium for fostering intercultural understanding, even among people who differ in language and geography (Lee, J., 2008). In this sense, food can be regarded as one of the most powerful forms of cross-cultural communication. (Somthawinpongsai, C., 2025c).

In the context of globalization and increasing human mobility, cultural exchange through food has become more widespread. Cuisines that were once confined to specific regions have evolved into global cultural phenomena, such as the growing popularity of Italian cuisine in Asia or Asian cuisines in Western countries (Heldke, L., 2003). The rise of food tourism further reflects this trend, as consumers actively seek cultural experiences through authentic culinary encounters (Richards, G., 2012). These developments indicate that cross-cultural food experiences are becoming an increasingly significant means of cultural learning and intercultural engagement.

However, differences in taste preferences, social norms, and dining practices continue to present major challenges in creating meaningful cross-cultural dining experiences (Rozin, P., 2005). Foods considered delicacies in one culture may be perceived as unfamiliar or unappealing in another. For example, the sweetness of Western desserts may not align with Asian taste preferences, while the communal dining style common in Chinese culture may be unfamiliar to Western diners (Fischler, C., 1988). Such differences underscore the complexity of designing dining experiences that balance cultural authenticity with local expectations.

Over the past two decades, the concept of food design has evolved into an interdisciplinary field that combines design thinking with culinary experiences. Food design extends beyond the creation of dishes to include the design of the entire dining experience, encompassing presentation, tableware, ambience, service interactions, and cultural storytelling (Zampollo, F., 2016). This development aligns with the rise of the Experience Economy, in which consumers increasingly value emotional engagement and experiential value beyond the functional aspects of products and services (Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H., 1999).

Consequently, the food and hospitality industries have shifted from a product-oriented focus to an experience-oriented approach that emphasizes sensory engagement, emotional response, and cultural meaning (Schmitt, B., 1999). Despite growing interest in this approach, the integration of cross-cultural experience into food design remains at an early stage. There is still a lack of systematic frameworks explaining how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to foreign culinary experiences.



Existing research on food has largely focused on nutrition, culinary history, or flavor profiles, while studies on experience design often examine user interactions within a single cultural context (Spence, C., 2017). As a result, limited attention has been given to understanding the factors that shape cross-cultural dining experiences, including sensory perception, emotional reactions, and meaning-making processes. (Somthawinpongsai, C., 2025b).

In practice, many cross-cultural dining experiences remain superficial. Restaurants and food-related services often incorporate foreign cultural elements symbolically, such as decorative motifs or international menu items, without designing meaningful cultural engagement (Long, L. M., 2004). At the same time, efforts to localize foreign cuisines may risk diluting their cultural authenticity (Mak, A. H. N., Lumbers, M., & Eves, A., 2012). This tension reflects the need for design strategies that can balance authenticity with adaptability.

Therefore, a critical gap remains in the development of theoretical frameworks and practical design approaches that can effectively enhance cross-cultural food experiences. This study aims to address this gap by integrating concepts from food design and experience design to improve the quality and cultural significance of cross-cultural dining experiences, thereby reinforcing the role of food as a medium for intercultural communication in a globalized society.

Objective

This study aims to examine the role of food design in facilitating cross-cultural understanding between Chinese and Thai culinary contexts. The specific research objectives are as follows:

To explore how cultural values, traditions, and aesthetic principles influence food design in Chinese and Thai culinary practices.

This objective seeks to understand how cultural factors shape food presentation, ingredient selection, and preparation techniques within these two distinct yet interconnected culinary traditions.

To identify and compare Chinese and Thai consumer preferences regarding key food design elements in cross-cultural dining experiences.

This includes examining perceptions of texture, color, aroma, and other sensory attributes to better understand how individuals from each culture interpret and engage with food design in intercultural contexts.

To investigate how food design can function as a medium for cross-cultural communication.

This objective focuses on the integration of cultural narratives, symbols, and storytelling into the dining experience, highlighting the potential of food design to foster cultural exchange and mutual understanding through meaningful symbolic expression.



Review of Literature and Ideas

This chapter reviews key concepts and prior studies related to cross-cultural food design from multiple theoretical perspectives, including semiotics, cultural communication, digital media, and consumer behavior. From a semiotic perspective, food is understood not only as a means of satisfying physiological needs but also as a cultural medium embedded with symbolic meanings (Barthes, R., 1979). Food, utensils, and dining rituals reflect values, beliefs, and identities within specific cultural contexts (Fischler, C., 1988). Therefore, in cross-cultural contexts, food design functions as a form of “symbolic translation,” enabling cultural meanings to be interpreted and understood across different cultural frameworks (Lotman, Y., 1990).

In terms of new media and content dissemination, recent studies highlight the growing role of digital platforms, particularly food-related vlogs, in transmitting culinary culture globally (Abidin, C., 2016). Chinese content creators tend to emphasize storytelling and cultural narratives, while Thai creators often highlight sensory experiences and street food environments. Despite stylistic differences, food has emerged as a universal communicative language in the digital age, bridging cultural divides and fostering global cultural exchange (Kittler, P. G., & Sucher, K. P., 2021).

Furthermore, the literature suggests that integrating cultural elements through food design can strengthen cultural identity and intercultural understanding (Zampollo, F., 2016). However, a critical challenge lies in balancing authenticity with adaptation. Excessive localization may dilute cultural identity, whereas strict adherence to original forms may reduce accessibility for foreign consumers (Mak, A. H. N. et al., 2012). Consumer behavior studies indicate that successful cross-cultural food design requires a user-centered approach, incorporating multisensory experiences, narrative elements, and culturally sensitive presentation to reduce psychological barriers and enhance acceptance (Spence, C., 2017).

In the comparative context of Chinese and Thai food cultures, both share a common Asian cultural foundation that emphasizes the social and emotional significance of food (Counihan, C., & Van Esterik, P., 2013). At the same time, differences in taste preferences, dining styles, and ritual practices create opportunities for innovation and cultural integration. (Somthawinpongsai, C., 2025a) National initiatives such as Thailand’s “Global Thai” strategy and China’s international promotion of regional cuisines further demonstrate how food can function as a form of cultural soft power and a vehicle for intercultural exchange (Long, L. M., 2004)

In summary, this literature review establishes a multidimensional theoretical foundation for the study by integrating:

1. Food as a symbolic cultural system
2. The role of digital media in culinary communication
3. Cross-cultural design approaches centered on consumer experience



These perspectives provide the conceptual basis for examining how food design can enhance cross-cultural understanding, strengthen cultural identity, and improve user experience within Chinese–Thai culinary contexts.

Research scope

This study examines cross-cultural food design within Chinese and Thai culinary representations in digital media. The scope is defined as follows:

Content Scope: The study analyzes food-related video content created by selected Chinese and Thai food vloggers, focusing on food presentation, cultural symbolism, and narrative elements.

Cultural Scope: The research is limited to cross-cultural interactions between Chinese and Thai food cultures, exploring both similarities and differences in aesthetic and symbolic practices.

Analytical Scope: The analysis concentrates on three dimensions:

- (1) cultural symbols in food design,
- (2) visual and sensory design elements, and
- (3) Audience perceptions reflected in Subscribers' comments.

Data Scope: The study includes publicly accessible video content and audience comments from digital platforms.

Contextual Scope: The research is confined to online media environments and does not extend to offline dining settings.

These boundaries ensure a focused and systematic analysis of food design as a medium of cross-cultural communication (Krippendorff, K., 2018).

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed qualitative research design integrating **case study** and **content analysis** approaches to investigate cross-cultural food design within Chinese and Thai contexts. The research focused on analyzing food-related video content produced by Chinese and Thai food vloggers, along with Subscribers' comments, to capture both the production and reception of food design within digital cross-cultural environments.

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative-dominant approach supported by quantitative measurement. This design enabled a comprehensive examination of cultural symbols, food design elements, and audience perceptions within contemporary media communication (Krippendorff, K., 2018; Yin, R. K., 2018).



Sample Selection

A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure the relevance and representativeness of the selected cases (Patton, M. Q., 2015). The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Content must present food within a cultural context
- Videos must demonstrate food design elements such as presentation, color, texture, or cultural storytelling
- Channels must have a significant number of followers and visible audience engagement

These criteria ensured that the selected vloggers represented influential voices in cross-cultural culinary communication.

Data Collection

The data consisted of:

- Video content related to food design
- Subscribers' comments reflecting perceptions and emotional responses

Data were collected through a combination of digital retrieval tools and manual verification to ensure completeness and accuracy (Neuendorf, K. A., 2017).

Data Analysis

Data analysis combined qualitative text interpretation and quantitative measurement. The analysis focused on three key dimensions:

1. Cultural symbols embedded in food presentation
2. Food design elements such as visual aesthetics and sensory cues
3. Emotional responses and attitudes expressed by audiences

Content analysis was used to categorize and interpret textual data, while quantitative frequency analysis was employed to identify patterns in audience engagement and perception (Krippendorff, K., 2018).

Trustworthiness

To enhance the reliability of findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing multiple sources, including video content and audience comments. Repeated coding procedures were also applied to ensure consistency in categorization (Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G., 1985). Overall, this methodological framework enabled a systematic exploration of how food design operates within cross-cultural digital environments, revealing patterns of communication, perception, and cultural interpretation

Results

This chapter presents the findings in alignment with the research objectives by examining cross-cultural food experiences through a comparative analysis of selected Chinese and Thai food vlog content and audience interactions.

Objective 1: Cultural Influence on Food Design

The findings reveal that cultural values, traditions, and aesthetic principles significantly shape food design practices in both Chinese and Thai culinary contexts. In Chinese settings, food presentation often emphasizes symbolic meaning, ritual continuity, and cultural authenticity, particularly in spaces such as Chinatown or traditional markets where food functions as an identity marker. In contrast, Thai food contexts, especially in street markets and snack environments, tend to prioritize sensory immediacy, vibrancy, and accessibility. These differences demonstrate how cultural frameworks influence ingredient presentation, preparation techniques, and aesthetic priorities in food design.

Objective 2: Consumer Preferences in Cross-Cultural Contexts

The analysis of audience responses highlights distinct yet adaptable consumer preferences in relation to food design elements such as visual appearance, texture, and sensory stimulation. Initial unfamiliarity often generates hesitation; however, design strategies that enhance clarity, transparency, and sensory engagement, such as open preparation processes or contextual explanations, encourage curiosity and acceptance. Viewer comments indicate that cross-cultural food experiences are negotiated dynamically through emotional responses such as trust, curiosity, and perceived risk, rather than fixed cultural reactions.

Objective 3: Food Design as a Medium for Cross-Cultural Communication

The findings further demonstrate that food design functions as an effective medium for cross-cultural communication by integrating cultural narratives and symbolic meanings into the dining experience. In culturally dense spaces like Chinatown, food serves as a carrier of heritage and authenticity. In contrast, in experiential environments such as night markets or street food settings, sensory engagement often takes precedence over symbolic interpretation. Audience interaction, particularly through online comments, shows that meaning is co-constructed socially through narrative framing and peer discussion. These interactional processes suggest that cross-cultural food experiences extend beyond individual perception and involve collective interpretation.

Comparative Insights

The comparison between Chinese and Thai food design preferences indicates that cultural differences are expressed as flexible orientations rather than rigid contrasts. Variations in sensory balance, narrative emphasis, and social interaction are evident but are continuously adapted across hybrid settings and situational contexts.

Overall, the findings suggest that cross-cultural food experience is a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of sensory design, cultural symbolism, and mediated audience



engagement. Food design operates as a mediating interface through which cultural differences are perceived, negotiated, and transformed. These insights offer empirical support for understanding food design as a communicative bridge in cross-cultural environments, informing the theoretical and practical implications discussed in the subsequent chapter.

Discussion, Suggestions

The findings of this study provide important insights into how cross-cultural food experiences are shaped not merely by culinary differences but through the interplay of cultural symbolism, sensory design, and mediated audience interaction. In alignment with the first research objective, the results confirm that food design practices are deeply embedded within cultural value systems. The symbolic orientation observed in Chinese food presentation reflects the broader role of food as a cultural signifier linked to ritual continuity and collective identity. This supports the argument that food operates as a semiotic system through which cultural meanings are constructed and communicated (Barthes, R., 1979; Counihan, C., & Van Esterik, P., 2013). In contrast, Thai food environments, particularly in street and market contexts, demonstrate a stronger emphasis on sensory immediacy and accessibility, aligning with prior studies that highlight the experiential and performative nature of Southeast Asian street food cultures (Henderson, J. C., 2019).

Regarding the second objective, the findings suggest that consumer preferences in cross-cultural food encounters are fluid rather than fixed. Initial unfamiliarity may evoke hesitation; however, transparency in preparation and contextual explanation appears to mitigate perceived cultural distance. This aligns with theories of consumer acculturation and experiential consumption, which emphasize that unfamiliar consumption practices can become acceptable through interpretive framing and sensory engagement (Askegaard, S., & Kjeldgaard, D., 2007; Schmitt, B., 1999). Emotional responses such as curiosity and trust, identified in audience interactions, reinforce the notion that consumer perception is socially constructed and negotiated rather than determined solely by cultural background (Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J., 2005).

The third objective is supported by the finding that food design functions as a communicative interface, facilitating cross-cultural understanding. In culturally dense environments such as Chinatown, food serves as a repository of heritage and authenticity, echoing the concept of food as an identity marker within diasporic communities (Lu, S., & Fine, G. A., 1995). Conversely, in night markets and street food settings, sensory engagement appears to dominate over symbolic interpretation, suggesting that affective experience may precede cultural cognition in informal environments. Audience comments further demonstrate that meaning-making occurs through collective discourse, supporting social constructivist perspectives on mediated interaction (Jenkins, H., 2006).



Comparatively, the differences observed between Chinese and Thai food design preferences do not represent rigid cultural boundaries but rather flexible orientations shaped by situational context. This finding aligns with cross-cultural adaptation theory, which posits that cultural expressions evolve dynamically through interaction and hybridization (Kim, Y. Y., 2001).

The coexistence of symbolic and sensory orientations indicates that cross-cultural food experiences are not dichotomous but negotiated across overlapping interpretive frameworks. Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of food design as a mediating mechanism that bridges cultural differences through sensory and symbolic integration. These findings reinforce the view that food is not only a material product but also a communicative medium through which cultural meanings are negotiated and shared (Fischler, C., 1988). By demonstrating how audience engagement shapes interpretation, the study extends existing literature on food and communication into digitally mediated contexts.

Suggestions and Implications

Based on the findings, this study offers several theoretical, practical, and policy-oriented implications for advancing cross-cultural communication through food design.

1. Theoretical Implications

The findings reinforce the conceptualization of food design as a communicative interface rather than merely an aesthetic or functional practice. By demonstrating how sensory elements, symbolic meanings, and audience interaction collectively shape cross-cultural food experiences, the study extends existing literature in food studies and communication theory. Food consumption has long been recognized as a cultural system through which meanings and identities are constructed and communicated (Barthes, R., 1979; Fischler, C., 1988). The results further support the view that consumption is not solely an individual act but a socially mediated process shaped by interpretive frameworks and experiential engagement (Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J., 2005).

Moreover, the comparative analysis between Chinese and Thai contexts suggests that cultural expression in food design operates through flexible orientations rather than rigid distinctions. This aligns with cross-cultural adaptation theory, which posits that cultural interaction produces hybrid and evolving forms of expression rather than fixed cultural boundaries (Kim, Y. Y., 2001).

2. Practical Implications

For food entrepreneurs, culinary designers, and tourism stakeholders, the findings highlight the importance of integrating symbolic authenticity with sensory accessibility in food presentation. The emphasis on transparency and experiential engagement reflects principles of experiential marketing, which stress the role of sensory stimulation and emotional response in shaping consumer perception (Schmitt, B., 1999).



In multicultural urban environments and tourism markets, food design can be intentionally utilized as a tool for intercultural engagement. Open preparation processes and narrative storytelling may enhance trust and reduce perceived cultural distance among consumers encountering unfamiliar foods (Henderson, J. C., 2019). This supports the argument that consumption experiences are socially constructed through interaction and narrative framing rather than determined solely by prior cultural familiarity (Askegaard, S., & Kjeldgaard, D., 2007).

Additionally, digital food content creators and vloggers play a crucial role in shaping collective interpretation. Mediated storytelling in online platforms contributes to participatory meaning-making, transforming individual perception into shared cultural understanding (Jenkins, H., 2006).

3. Policy and Cultural Implications

At a broader level, the findings suggest that food design can function as a soft cultural bridge that promotes cross-cultural understanding through everyday consumption practices. Food has been widely recognized as a medium through which identity and heritage are communicated in global and diasporic contexts (Lu, S., & Fine, G. A., 1995). Policymakers in tourism and cultural development sectors may therefore consider culinary environments—such as markets and food festivals—not only as economic assets but also as platforms for intercultural dialogue.

Supporting initiatives that combine heritage preservation with experiential innovation can contribute to cultural sustainability while fostering global cultural exchange (Counihan, C., & Van Esterik, P., 2013).

4. Implications for Future Research

Future studies may extend this research by examining cross-cultural food experiences across additional cultural contexts or by exploring how digital mediation influences consumer perception and adaptation. Quantitative approaches could further investigate how specific design elements impact consumer trust and willingness to engage with unfamiliar foods. Longitudinal research may also provide deeper insights into how repeated exposure to cross-cultural food environments shapes evolving preferences and adaptive cultural understanding over time (Kim, Y. Y., 2001).

Knowledge of Research

This study contributes to the development of interdisciplinary knowledge by advancing the understanding of cross-cultural food experiences as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of sensory design, cultural symbolism, and mediated audience engagement. Rather than viewing food consumption as a culturally fixed behavior, the findings highlight how food design functions as a communicative mechanism through which meanings are constructed and negotiated across cultural contexts.



The research introduces the perspective of food design as a mediating interface that enables individuals to engage with unfamiliar cultural practices through experiential interaction and narrative framing. In this sense, food operates simultaneously as a material practice and a symbolic medium, allowing cultural understanding to emerge through sensory engagement rather than solely through cognitive interpretation.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that meaning in cross-cultural food encounters is socially co-constructed, particularly within digitally mediated environments where audience interaction plays a significant role in shaping perception and interpretation. This extends existing views of cross-cultural adaptation by emphasizing the importance of mediated participation alongside physical experience.

The comparative insights from Chinese and Thai food environments suggest that cultural differences in food design are better understood as flexible orientations rather than rigid contrasts. Overall, the study offers a conceptual contribution by integrating sensory experience, cultural symbolism, and mediated interaction into a unified framework for understanding how everyday practices such as food consumption can facilitate intercultural communication in contemporary global settings.

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