Article

An Exploratory Intervention Program on Chinese Culture among CFL Students at a Vietnamese University

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Abstract: This article reports on a study of an intensive three-week culture intervention program, delivered via VooV Meeting (an online meeting platform) as an additional opportunity for CFL students at a Vietnamese university in December 2021. The primary aim was to explore students' perceptions and experiences of learning about Chinese culture in a non-target language environment since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two hundred and nine mixed-level undergraduate CFL students participated in a survey administered via Google Forms. Overall results indicated that students valued the opportunity offered by this program to learn Chinese culture and acknowledged the importance of cultural study in CFL. There appeared to be different preferences among male and female students and the different year groups in choosing the contents and methods of cultural learning. Additionally, students expressed concerns about using technology in language and culture learning despite its benefits, especially in the absence of real-life human interactions and communications due to travel restrictions. One significant finding was that students recognised teachers' essential role in learning culture. The survey results, in particular the participants' responses to open-ended questions, are discussed in this paper. The understanding gained from this study is expected to provide Chinese language professionals and practitioners with insights and suggestions on how Chinese culture can be better integrated into CFL through appropriate and effective teaching strategies in a post-pandemic era.

1. Introduction

Vietnam has recently witnessed a rapid shift from a domestic economy to one participating in regional and international markets. In response to keeping pace with regional and international developments, the internationalisation of universities has been positioned as a strategic approach to enhancing the multilingual capabilities of Vietnamese students in a global context [1]. Hence, it poses significant challenges for language educators and learners at Vietnamese universities in improving language proficiency and cultivating cultural competence in an increasingly globalised world.

The framework of the six different language proficiency levels used in the Vietnamese national education system was officially adopted and developed from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) [2,3]. Foreign language education in Vietnam has embraced opportunities since the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) integration and implementation of political and economic reform [4]. Under the pressure of regional and international economic competition, the Vietnamese Government has firmly committed to improving young Vietnamese graduates' foreign language communicative competence by introducing the National Foreign Languages 2020

Project (NFLP) [5]. According to the goals in the project, Vietnamese students should be able to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. In 2017, the Government of Vietnam approved the revised NFLP for the 2017–2025 period to boost foreign language learning and teaching [6]. As one of the eleven training languages in the Vietnamese higher education system, the Chinese language is represented widely by 76 higher education institutions which train specialists in the Chinese language [7].

2. Context of the Study

This study was conducted in the context of an undergraduate course in Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) at a public university in central Vietnam. Chinese and English are the only two foreign languages offered at this chosen Vietnamese university. The CFL course has become rather popular as there seems to be a high demand of Chinese language speakers given the economic development with Chinese enterprises locally [8]. The university's CFL program was established based on the policies, regulations and standards about national foreign languages education issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). The four-year period of the undergraduate study consists of three-year of skills and knowledge development before the final year of an internship at local Chinese enterprises. Only one compulsory subject is culture-related and scheduled in the second year of the CFL curriculum. Given the constraints of the curriculum, there are limited resources for CFL students to learn Chinese culture during their study period. With such limitations, an intervention program on Chinese culture was initiated and implemented in December 2021. The program aimed to promote Chinese culture and language learning by encouraging students to reflect on Vietnamese culture through direct engagement with the instructor and tailored learning contents. Simultaneously, students were provided with opportunities to improve their listening and speaking skills required for communication through interactions with one of the researchers, who was the main instructor for the program.

In addition to understanding the foreign language landscape at universities in Vietnam, it is also imperative to know about the connections between China and Vietnam from the perspective of CFL education at Vietnamese universities. For centuries, Vietnam experienced strong cultural influence from China [7]. Based on previous studies [9,10], the Sinosphere (or East Asian Cultural Sphere) contains five entities: China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and Vietnam. The creation of ideographic Vietnamese was an adaptation of classical Chinese characters which was used over a period of centuries-long Chinese influence [10]. In addition, Chinese language was used in the educational system of feudal Vietnam until the early 20th century [11]. Clearly, Chinese and Vietnamese cultures are closely associated for historical, social, educational, economic, and political reasons. Schumann (1976) [12] stated that congruence or similarity between the culture of the target language and that of the foreign language can affect social solidarity. If the two cultures are similar, then integration and social distance are reduced. Moreover, similarities and differences can be compared through the observations of students hailing from different cultural backgrounds, thus a deeper understanding of the two cultures can be achieved [13].

Vietnam and China have continuously had cultural exchanges from ancient times to present. The contact between the two countries makes Vietnam much influenced by China, especially in the language aspect. The seemingly identical cultures of Vietnam and China have each developed their unique features over the years [14]. Despite the close relationship between Chinese and Vietnamese cultures, their distinctive characteristics undoubtedly impact Vietnamese CFL students' lives, particularly concerning the socio-cultural influences. In terms of this study, CFL learners study Chinese language in this unique Vietnamese cultural environment, it is important that teachers encourage and help students explore their home culture and language by comparing them to those of the Chinese [15]. This could serve as a point of reference from which CFL students can further their understanding of the concept and nature of Chinese language through comparisons of Chinese culture and their own. It was critical to examine the strong link between these two Eastern

cultures and understand the role of Chinese culture in Chinese language learning. With regard to this, Figure 1 below illustrates the scope of this cultural intervention program, including four conditional key elements (KE). On the one hand, 1 indicates the conditions that are met, that is, KE1 represents the Chinese character culture circle, and KE3 represents the history of using Chinese characters. On the other hand, 0 indicates the conditions that are not met, that is, KE2 represents a non-target language learning environment, and KE4 represents non-native Chinese language learning background.
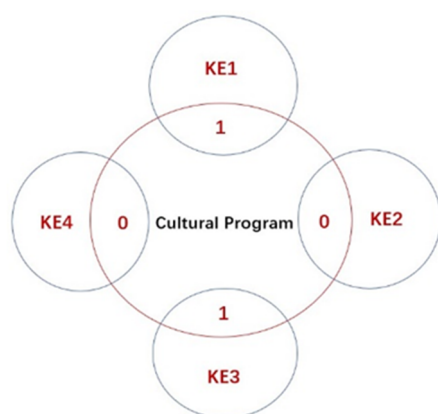
Figure 1. Four key elements constructing the cultural program.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Language and Culture

Language and culture are inseparable, interdependent, and their interrelated relationships benefit each other in language learning and teaching. That is, understanding culture and cultural differences assists learners in achieving language proficiency effectively and vice versa [16]. The most successful language learners learn culture and language simultaneously, therefore teaching language and teaching culture cannot be separated [17,18]. In the same vein, language learning entails linguistic knowledge and awareness of the importance of the context and motives behind communication. There is a large number of published studies that describe the link between culture and language. Research [19] showed that teaching any language involves teaching culture, as culture shapes how language is structured and used. Along the same lines, Stern (1992) [20] argued that cultural teaching often provides context without which the language remains an empty code and lacks credibility from learner's perspective. Researchers [21] also claimed that language and culture interact with each other in a way that connects culture to all levels of language use and structures. Overall, these studies highlight the unique relationship between culture and language.

The language education issue can be complex and multifaceted [22]. Learning a new language is a complex process, and so is language teaching. With the advancement of technology, the way we learn and communicate has gradually changed [13]. According to the review studies on technology-supported cultural learning conducted by [13], technology plays an essential role in language and culture learning due to the creation of authentic learning experiences. That is, cross-cultural learning based on technological support is especially important, due to the recent pandemic, during which most people have turned to online mediums for human communication [13]. For instance, researchers reported on benefits such as students' positive attitudes towards technology-supported learning activities and that learning activities helped develop language and cross-cultural skills [23]. However, despite the widely recognised advantages created by technologies in formal and/or informal environments, the COVID-19 pandemic has attributed the complexity to new challenges, such as technology accessibility, affordability, and reliability. Hence, it poses significant challenges for language educators to improve language education, par-

ticularly in cultivating learners' cultural competence due to the increasingly global nature of society [24].

As stated earlier, since language reflects speakers' culture, learners should be given insights into the habits, customs, and values and how these are similar to or different from their own. A research study [25] described three reasons for the culture component being so crucial in language learning. The third principal reason for stressing culture in language classes relates to students. On the one hand, students are extremely interested in the people who speak the language they are studying. On the other hand, they probably know very little about the basic aspects of their culture. As Stern (1992) [20] (p. 216) reiterated, "one of the most important aims of culture teaching is to help the learner gain an understanding of the native speaker's perspective". There has been substantial literature on teachers' perspectives toward Western cultures, in which English was the most popular language, and American culture has received more attention than any other culture [24]. However, there is little investigation into examinations on enhancing Chinese cultural learning and teaching in CFL in the Vietnamese university context, from the learners' point of view in particular. The present study attempted to contribute to the literature on this under-researched issue with a clear focus on nation-specific comparisons in culture teaching.

3.2. Cultural Teaching Approaches

Researchers [26] asserted that culture in language learning and teaching needs to be addressed within a comprehensive, dynamic, reflective, critical, and interactional understanding of culture. There is no exception in cultural teaching in CFL, which should assist learners in understanding Chinese culture using appropriate teaching approaches. From the perspective of Chinese language teaching, several key aspects need to be considered when designing cultural learning contents, such as the learner's language background and real-life experience within the East Asian Cultural Sphere, and the learning environment of the target language. These factors may affect the chosen approaches of teaching, the level of student engagement, and the learning experience given the abovementioned scope of the program.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, CFL learners have become more reliant on technology to obtain cultural information. However, given that there are many similar cultural characteristics within the Chinese character culture circle, misunderstandings can easily occur with communication. It may pose a potential challenge for CFL learners to establish cultural concepts appropriately and in learning Chinese culture as well as effectively communicating using the Chinese language. Therefore, this study focuses on how CFL learners from another Sinosphere nation, such as Vietnam, can develop their ability to learn Chinese culture, so that they can enhance their Chinese language learning.

While recognising the issues above, the section below section will start with a brief introduction of the four key phrases mentioned in this study, that is, cultural symbols (CS), cultural knowledge (CK), cultural awareness (CA), and cultural competence (CC). What follows is a brief overview of the cultural teaching approaches employed in this cultural program with a reference to the knowledge-based and contrastive approaches suggested by Piatkowska (2015) [27]. A more detailed account of these keywords concerning this study is given in the next section.

Fenner (2000) [28] argued that language learners should be given opportunities to develop CK, CA, and CC in a way that might lead to a better understanding of the target culture, as well as their own culture. Speaking of CS, Peirce [29] believed that the production of meaning was a process of symbolization, and experience was the way to make sense of symbols. In addition, CK, CA and CC were mentioned by several language researchers in describing learner's outcomes of culture learning [30,31]. Nguyen (2017) [32] proposed a three-level framework from CK to CC as a reference for setting pedagogical objectives of teaching culture in language education. The importance of these terms was also illustrated in Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence [33].

Regarding teaching approaches, the main ones are knowledge-based and contrastive approaches. Firstly, according to Nguyen (2017) [32], the knowledge-based approach aims to provide learners with knowledge of facts and information about the target culture, such as Chinese festivals, customs, and arts selected for this program. Byram (2020) [33] stated that cultural knowledge is structured and systematically presented information about culture. For CFL learners in Sinosphere, culture learning can help them raise cultural awareness by acquiring new cultural knowledge and integrating new perceptions and understandings into their personal experience on a daily basis. Additionally, Polanyi (1958) [34] claimed that effective learning needs knowledge classification, that is explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge. Knowledge can better link the learning of explicit and implicit culture [35] because it is the basis of cognitive processes [36]. Knowledge management in this program focused on the connection and coherence between explicit and implicit knowledge. Implicit understanding may result in explicit learning [37]. Secondly, Nguyen (2017) [32] also summarised that the contrastive approach helps learners to be aware of these similarities and differences between their own culture and the target language culture and encourages them to look for a connection between the two cultures. In relation to this program, it is critical that CFL learners can see the relationship between different cultures by contrasting and comparing Chinese and Vietnamese cultures. Generally, the program process and contents described in the following sections were inspired and informed by these theories and approaches to teaching culture with respect to the limitations of both contrastive and knowledge-based approaches pointed out by Piatkowska [27].

4. The Cultural Intervention Program

This cultural intervention program incorporated nine synchronised sessions via VooV Meeting into teaching Chinese culture at a Vietnamese university. This section will provide a comprehensive account of the cultural intervention program, including the program description, the program design and teaching process, and the program contents.

4.1. Program Description

This program was initiated to provide undergraduate CFL students at this Vietnamese university with an opportunity to study Chinese culture via VooV synchronised sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the participating students were from years 1, 2 and 3. The students of Year 4 could not participate in the study due to the internships in their final year. The program was conducted from 15 to 31 December 2021, and a total of 9 sessions were delivered to the cohorts of 1st, 2nd and 3rd year CFL students. Each session lasted for 90 min, in alignment with the regular teaching schedules.

Considering different levels of Chinese language proficiency, the same session was offered repeatedly to each year group weekly with the tailored contents suitable for each respective language level. Specifically, all sessions for the Year 1 students were delivered with the support from a local bilingual teacher assistant who explained the contents in a synchronised manner. In addition, interactive learning activities and discussion topics were developed to engage the Year 2 and 3 students considering their relatively higher language levels.

4.2. Program Design and Teaching Process

The program design was guided and informed by several strategic documentations, including policies and standards for Chinese culture and language learning: (1) the three primary dimensions: connecting Chinese and foreign cultures; comparing cultural differences; and cultural interaction in the "Chinese Culture and Society Reference Framework for International Chinese Language Education" [38], which is the first framework of reference used in international Chinese language education; (2) the Vietnamese Government's National Foreign Language Policies; and (3) the CFL syllabus and curriculums at the university where the study was conducted. Figure 2 below illustrates the cultural program design.
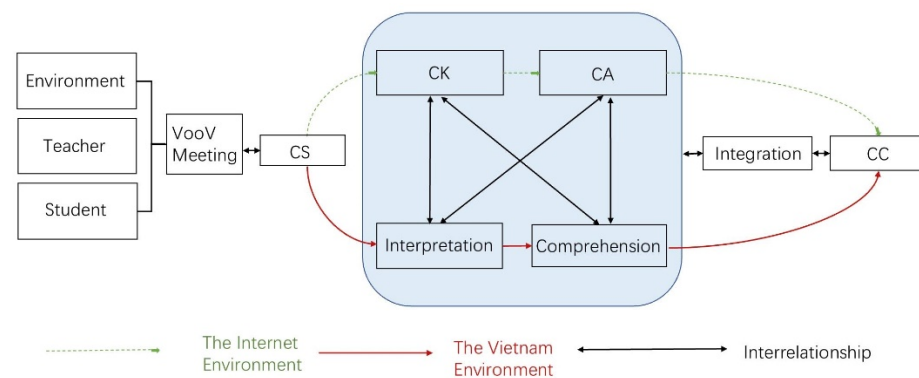
Figure 2. Cultural program design.

The fundamental principle of this program was to use the real cultural environment of Vietnam as an anchor for CFL students to learn Chinese culture naturally and effectively. As shown on the left side of Figure 2, the program consists of three main components: environment, teacher, and student. In terms of learning contexts, the dotted line represents the online environment, and the solid red line represents the Vietnam environment, explicitly referring to cultural learning environment. As indicated in Figure 2, this program was student-centred and teacher-instructed under the interplay of these two learning environments. The central area of Figure 2 displays the gradual and progressive culture teaching process: (1) the acquisition of CK through introducing and explaining CS; (2) the development of CA through understanding cultural concepts; (3) the improvement of CC through integrating CK and CA. It is worth noting that CS is an important medium to connect the two learning environments in the whole process, which enables learners to repeatedly reinforce their learning of CK and CA before they make progress to the next stage CC in cultural learning.

Figure 3 below provides the cultural teaching process at a micro-level. CS, CK, and CA constructed the cultural teaching process with CC situated in the centre. Interpretation, comprehension, and integration are the three-staged teaching objectives in the cultural teaching process. In terms of this study, CS is considered as an important starting point because culture depends on the use of symbols [39] and all human thoughts and experiences are symbolic activities [29]. The next step in this process was to integrate relevant cultural concepts in Chinese language by connecting students' life experience as CK particularly implicit CK is obtained through personal experience, practice, and comprehension [34]. According to the Knowledge Spiral Model by [40], the process of explicit knowledge to implicit knowledge was also an important way from understanding to explanation. The third step was to inquiry the meaning of CS and reflect on the differences in similar CS between Vietnamese and Chinese cultures. Researchers [41] stated that cultural learning was a conscious and purposeful process, and cultural learning relies on cultural comparisons, and it is critical to recognise the need for constant repetition between the learner's culture and the culture they are learning from. The final step is CC, which is derived from the ability to integrate CS, CK, and CA in a circular way. Just as Bloom (1956) [36] argued, cognitive learning such as culture, involves knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, and the ability to integrate the elements.
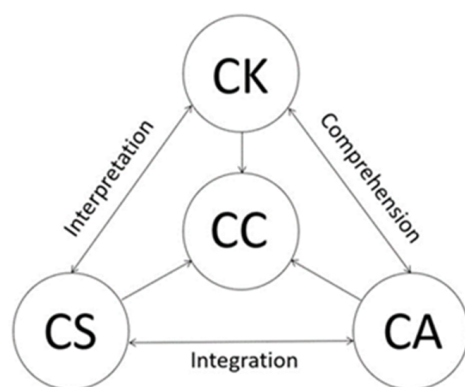
Figure 3. Cultural teaching process.

4.3. Program Contents

It is undeniable that cultural learning is not a simple linear learning process. Teachers should consider local customs, knowledge background, and life experience of CFL learners [41]. Guided by the above-mentioned cultural teaching approaches, this section presents the detailed teaching contents in alignment with the three teaching objectives in Figure 3 above.

All things seen in life are symbols, and the visually visible CS allows CFL students to perceive the cultural topics in the course, and teachers can also clearly explain the relationship between CS and CK, especially in the interpretation of explicit knowledge [39,41]. In this program, the teacher explained the relationships between the five elements and the twelve earthly branches, particularly how the two concepts are reflected in Chinese zodiacs, time calculation, principles of traditional Chinese medicine, and in aspects of architecture. On this basis, it is not only easier for CFL students to connect explicit and implicit knowledge, but they can gain an in-depth understanding of Chinese cultural concepts through contrasts. Specifically, teachers can assist students comprehend meanings behind cultural taboos by introducing several representative Chinese characters, such as blessings (吉、喜、福、壽) and flowers (梅、莲、菊、蘭). The teacher then demonstrated the relationship between Chinese language and Chinese culture by incorporating several Chinese idiomatic phrases with the aforementioned Chinese characters. For instance, "福" and "壽" contain profound and auspicious meanings in Chinese culture. These two Chinese characters are often combined with other characters, such as "松" and "仙" to form a number of four-word Chinese idioms indicating longevity. Another example is that "菊" (chrysanthemums) is associated with funerals, there it should be avoided when preparing gifts. In addition, the Vietnamese national flower, "莲花" (lotus flower) is associated and often found at Buddhist temples in both Vietnam and China as a cultural symbol of purity. Thus, the program content enables the teacher to guide the CFL learners to reflect on Vietnamese culture while learning about Chinese culture, and further enhances students' ability to communicate in the Chinese language in a culturally appropriate way.

5. The Study

The purpose of this study was to find out CFL students' perceptions of this intervention program based on their true feelings and experiences. It is anticipated that the program will cultivate the ability of CFL students at this university to explore various cultural topics progressively through multiple perspectives, especially in conjunction with their current level and understanding of the Chinese language and culture. The study aimed to address the following research questions:

- What are students' perceptions of cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and cultural competence in relation to learning Chinese culture?
- What strategies do students employ to acquire cultural knowledge and develop cultural awareness and competence?

- What are the benefits and challenges of learning Chinese culture using technology from students' perspectives?
- To what extent does this intensive cultural program enhance students' Chinese language learning?

5.1. Research Instrument

Questionnaires are widely employed as devices to gather information about people's opinions [42], and sometimes posing several open-ended questions at the end gives respondents space to formulate their own replies. For this research, the questionnaire was considered an appropriate data collection tool as it enabled data to be gathered from large numbers of participants in a straightforward and time-efficient manner. As investigating CFL students' perceptions was the aim of this study, the advantage of this method is that it allows researchers to make predictions about CFL students views and experiences on cultural study. The properly constructed and administered questionnaire serves as a most appropriate and valid data gathering tool as it is both resource and time efficient [43].

This study used an online questionnaire created via Google Forms to collect data due to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 in Vietnam. The procedure involved an invitation email sent out to all the students of the CFL program towards the end of the intensive program. Upon completion of the cultural program, students completed a survey that was used to evaluate the program's effect by measuring their ad hoc perceptions. The study was given institutional ethical approval in December 2021 before commencing the program and students were assured that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. They could withdraw from the study without reason.

The questions and statements in the questionnaire were designed to collect three broad types of information: (1) background information from each student about demographic characteristics; (2) information relating to students' perceptions on CK, CA and CC in general; (3) information relating to students' perceptions on Chinese culture learning in CFL. Keeping this in mind, the survey questionnaire consisted of three sections: demographic questions, rankings on the importance of the three dimensions of culture, CK (Q8–12), CA (Q13–17), and CC (Q18–22), and seven open-ended questions (Q1–7) inquiring about perceptions on the cultural study in Chinese language learning and teaching.

In order to accommodate different levels of Chinese language proficiency among student participants, the survey questionnaire was initially designed in English and then translated into Vietnamese by researchers who are fluent in both languages. The initial questionnaire was refined through iterative consultations with two experienced CFL researchers. Moreover, the questionnaire items were validated after consultation with five participants before the formal investigation. The process enabled the researchers to measure the clarify of the instrument so that adjustments could be made before the final implementation of the online survey. For instance, a few changes were made to the demographic section to ensure data correctness and usefulness.

5.2. Research Participants

As described in Table 1 below, participants (N = 209) were drawn from the body of currently enrolled students in the three levels of the CFL program at a Vietnamese university, including students from the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year of the program. Eighty-eight per cent (n = 184) were female, 12% (n = 25) being male. Most students (94.7%, n = 198) were between 18–21 years of age. There was an even distribution in terms of the levels of study, respectively, 1st year 36.8% (n = 77), 2nd year 28.2% (n = 59), and 3rd year 34.9% (n = 73). It is expected that the participants' actual proficiency in Chinese ranges from the beginning to intermediate level.

**Table 1.** Participants' demographic information.

Variable		n	Percent
Gender (N = 209)	Female	184	88.0
	Male	25	12.0
Grade (N = 209)	1st year	77	36.8
	2nd year	59	28.2
	3rd year	73	34.9
Age (N = 209)	18–21 years	198	94.7
	>21 years	11	5.3

5.3. Research Data Analysis

The research data analysis process was twofold, quantitative and qualitative. One researcher in the current study conducted a quantitative analysis to address the research questions. A progressive approach was adopted for the statistical analysis of the collected quantitative data. Specifically, the quantitative analysis of the survey questionnaire was conducted using several statistical techniques with the aid of SPSS and R. Descriptive statistics (Table 2), such as mean standard deviation scores, were used to summarise and present participants' responses in a convenient and informative way [44]. Apart from descriptive statistics, inferential statistics were used to analyse the data and to draw conclusions from the sample populations, that is, Pearson correlations (Figure 4), and regression analysis (Figure 5a,b) among CK, CA, and CC. Statistical tests were chosen for their appropriateness, in particular the BMA method was chosen because it provides simple data visualisation on multiple models generated from the dataset.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of the three dimensions (CK, CA and CC).

Culture Dimensions	Question	Mean/M	Std. Deviation/SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Cultural Knowledge (CK) (M = 8.93, SD = 1.63, N = 209) CK Cronbach's Alpha = 0.929	Q8	9.14	1.58	0.91
	Q9	8.89	1.58	0.91
	Q10	8.89	1.71	0.92
	Q11	8.88	1.61	0.91
	Q12	8.83	1.66	0.92
Cultural Awareness (CA) (M = 9.04, SD = 1.58, N = 209) CA Cronbach's Alpha = 0.932	Q13	9.15	1.64	0.93
	Q14	9.15	1.44	0.91
	Q15	9.09	1.57	0.90
	Q16	8.85	1.71	0.92
	Q17	8.97	1.53	0.91
Cultural Competence (CC) (M = 9.07, SD = 1.46, N = 209) CC Cronbach's Alpha = 0.937	Q18	8.80	1.78	0.95
	Q19	9.15	1.38	0.91
	Q20	9.03	1.38	0.92
	Q21	9.20	1.40	0.92
	Q22	9.19	1.35	0.92
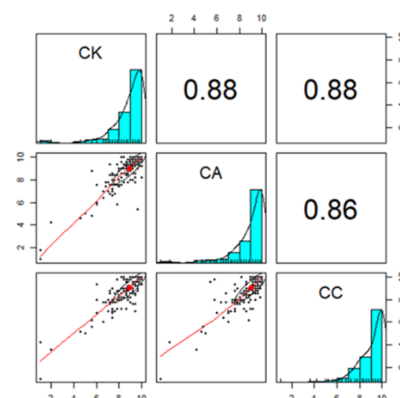
Figure 4. Correlations among CK, CA, and CC.

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Call:
bicreg(x = x, y = y, strict = FALSE, OR = 20)
  4 models were selected
 Best 4 models (cumulative posterior probability = 1 ):
```

	p!=0	EV	SD	model 1	model 2	model 3	model 4
Intercept	100	1.476376	0.28796	1.43279	1.58402	1.5893	1.34429
Age	11	-0.00946	0.03422	.	.	-0.08571	.
Gender	4.9	0.002657	0.03017	.	.	.	0.05467
Grade	20.2	-0.01668	0.03942	.	-0.08241	.	.
CK	100	0.482609	0.0604	0.48424	0.4806	0.47712	0.48199
CA	100	0.368831	0.06205	0.36719	0.37211	0.37274	0.36783
nVar				2	3	3	3
r2				0.803	0.806	0.805	0.803
BIC				-328.741	-326.442	-325.23	-323.589
post prob				0.639	0.202	0.11	0.049

(**a**)
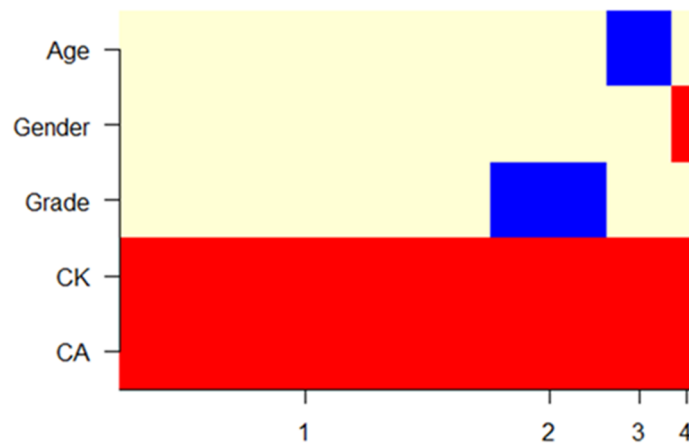
(**b**)

Figure 5. (**a**) BMA model analysis results. (**b**) Models selected by BMA.

Apart from the quantitative analysis, the other two researchers adopted thematic analysis [45] to identify and analyse major themes from a set of responses to the open-ended questions [46,47] using NVivo [48]. Constant comparative method in thematic analysis was utilised in order to make the mass of the collected qualitative data comprehensible. Firstly, responses to the open-ended question in the questionnaire were imported into NVivo. Secondly, the researchers read through the responses thoroughly to identify emerging themes within the texts. Finally, with the aid of several functions in NVivo, such as text search, word frequency search, and querying abilities, the researchers were able to collect and display key words and phrases and similarly coded data for examination [49], ultimately accomplishing a thorough iterative analytic process.

Primary findings from both qualitative data and quantitative data were triangulated. The results section below provides a detailed account of quantitative and qualitative data analysis findings.

6. Results

Survey data for this study were collected from Year 1, 2, and 3 undergraduate CFL students enrolled in a central Vietnamese university. This section reports the results of quantitative and qualitative analyses in response to the four research questions (RQ) and further discussions of the findings with regard to relevant literature is presented in the following section.

6.1. Quantitative Data Result

RQ1: *What are students' perceptions of cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and cultural competence in relation to learning Chinese culture? (Qs8–22)*

In response to RQ1, most of those surveyed indicated that students perceived that CK, CA, and CC are closely related to learning Chinese culture. First, Table 2 above presents the median values and standard deviation of the participants' responses to each survey item with regard to CK (M = 8.93, SD = 1.63), CA (M = 9.04, SD = 1.58), and CC (M = 9.07, SD = 1.46). The descriptive statistics from the questionnaire indicated that the students perceived that CK, CA, and CC interrelate and interplay in cultural learning. In addition, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used to determine the internal reliability of the instrument. The result showed that the coefficient alpha was over 0.9, which indicates substantial reliability of the observed variables. Moreover, further statistical tests (independent-samples *t*-test and ANOVA) were conducted to determine if there were differences in demographical variables (gender, age, grade) for CK, CA, and CC. There was significant difference in CK for male and female (p = 0.048). However, there was no difference in the other dimensions for age and grade.

Second, the Pearson correlation test was conducted to see whether students perceive that CK, CA and CC are closely related. The correlation between the two variables is denoted by the letter r and quantified with a number, which varies between −1 and +1. For example, correlation coefficient values below 0.3 are considered weak; values between 0.3–0.7 are considered moderate; values above 0.7 are considered strong. Additionally, the *p*-value helps to assess whether a correlation is statistically significant. To demonstrate the significance of a relationship or association between two variables, a *p*-value is presented, and it needs to be less than or equal to 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$) [44,50]. The results of the correlational analysis are summarised in Figure 4 above. The Pearson correlation coefficient determined that there were strong positive correlations that exist between CK and CA (r = 0.88, $p < 0.05$); CK and CC (r = 0.88, $p < 0.05$); and CA and CC (r = 0.86, $p < 0.05$).

Third, the regression analysis was conducted to further examine the relationship between the three independent variables (grade, age, and gender) in relation to the three dimensions (CK, CA, and CC). A multiple linear regression was calculated to predict CC based on CK and CA. A significant regression equation was found (F (2, 206) = 419.587, $p < 0.000$), with an R2 of 0.803. Participants predicted CC was equal to 1.43 + 0.48 (CK) + 0.36 (CA). When CK increased by 0.484 and CA increased by 0.367, then CC increased by 1. Both CK and CA were significant predictors of CC. Importantly, further investigation was conducted to assess multicollinearity in regression analysis. No signs were detected by examining tolerance (T) and variance inflation factor (VIF) for each independent variable: CK (T = 0.216, VIF = 4.639), CA (T = 0.217, VIF = 4.601), gender (T = 0.918, VIF = 1.089), age (T = 0.701, VIF = 1.427), grade (T = 0.709, VIF = 1.410).

Therefore, based on the analysis shown in Figure 5a, four models were discovered using BMA method in R for multiple linear regression (Figure 5b). An inspection of the data in Figure 5a revealed that Model 1 (the large red area at the bottom) in Figure 5b was the best one among the four models. The results showed slight differences by adding grade, age and gender as independent variables into Model 2, 3 and 4.

- Model 1: Participants' predicted CC was equal to 1.43 + 0.48(CK) + 0.36(CA). R2 = 0.803, post prob = 0.639. When CK increased by 0.48 and CA increased by 0.36, then CC increased by 1. Both CK and CA were significant predictors of CC.
- Model 2: Participants' predicted CC was equal to 1.58–0.08(grade) + 0.48(CK) + 0.37(CA). R2 = 0.806, post prob = 0.202. When grade increased by −0.08, CK increased by 0.48 and CA increased by 0.37, then CC increased by 1. Grade, CK and CA were significant predictors of CC.
- Model 3: Participants' predicted CC was equal to 1.58–0.09(age) + 0.48(CK) + 0.37(CA). R2 = 0.805, post prob = 0.110. When age increased by −0.08, CK increased by 0.48

and CA increased by 0.37, then CC increased by 1. Age, CK and CA were significant predictors of CC.

- Model 4: Participants' predicted CC was equal to = 1.58 + 0.05 (gender)+ 0.48(CK) + 0.37(CA). R^2 = 0.803, post prob = 0.049. When male or female increased by −0.08, CK increased by 0.48 and CA increased by 0.37, then CC increased by 1. Gender (male or female), CK and CA were significant predictors of CC.

6.2. Qualitative Data Result

The qualitative data provided a much richer and more in-depth understanding and exploration of meanings than could be derived from the numerical data collected at the quantitative phase. In this study, apart from the quantitative results reported earlier, the qualitative analysis of the seven open-ended questions revealed several interesting findings detailed in the sections below.

RQ2: *What strategies do students employ to acquire cultural knowledge and develop cultural awareness and competence? (Qs4–6)*

In response to this question, a range of responses from different genders and year groups was elicited. Two recurrent themes, static and dynamic, emerged from the analysis relating to the strategies used to obtain cultural knowledge, cultivate cultural awareness, and develop competence. The static way was mainly through the media materials, such as books, newspapers, and TV programs. In comparison, the dynamic way was via real-life communications and interactions with people from Chinese linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Firstly, in learning cultural knowledge, apart from acknowledging the values of famous Chinese novels or books, both groups considered that teachers play an essential role in guiding the study of cultural knowledge. Specifically, the male students revealed a keen interest in authentic cultural knowledge, such as history, news, and documentaries, while the female students mainly placed their focuses on Chinese movies and pop culture. A number of students expressed great interests in Chinese history and mentioned that "reading Chinese classical novels and watching dramas and movies" helped them to understand Chinese culture. Interestingly, quite a few students believed that participating in university short-term course was also an effective way to learn about culture. This statement supported students' views on the role of teachers in learning culture.

Secondly, speaking of increasing cultural awareness, the male students tended to delve into historical materials to gain experience and explore Chinese culture, while the female groups were inclined to receive cultural information from multiple perspectives through close observations of people of the target language. As one student pointed out, "I often learn from teachers and friends who understand Chinese culture to improve my cultural awareness." Another student shard this view, who claimed that "the way I understand culture is by going to social networking sites on a regular basis to learn about their customs, behaviours, and the way they interact with each other." Similarly, both groups recognised the important role of teachers in helping them raise cultural awareness. Besides, the 1st and 3rd Year students mentioned that respect was the basic attitude for cultural awareness. One student remarked, "To learn to respect the culture of each country, we must first respect the culture of each place and its language, such as different dialects".

Thirdly, according to language competence and culture, the male students desired dynamic cultural competence, such as cross-cultural communication and social activities, in contrast, the female group preferred to develop cultural competence in a static way, such as books, and multimedia resources. One male student reported, "I often participate in outdoor activities to gain knowledge and improve cultural ability." Additionally, it was evident that the 3rd Year students were eager to enhance their cultural competence through real-life communication. Several third-year students commented that, "After each lesson, we often take part in small discussion groups to share our learning experiences." From the perspective of different year groups, it can be assumed that the 1st Year students were the

most curious group and excited to learn more about Chinese culture. Still, they mentioned that they could not fully understand some of the learning contents due to their limited language abilities.

RQ3: *What are the benefits and challenges of learning Chinese culture using technology from students' perspectives? (Q7)*

When the participants were asked about learning Chinese culture with technology, the majority of those who responded to this item felt that there were benefits and challenges in using technology to learn Chinese culture. Concerning the two aspects of technology use, themes such as accuracy, interest, efficiency, and relevance recurred throughout the dataset. Most of the students mentioned the benefits, such as easy and quick access to information through fast speed internet and its convenience and effectiveness in acquiring materials.

Furthermore, students seemed to agree that technology enhanced language learning performance. As one student remarked, "The use of technology increases motivation and interest in learning Chinese language due to the freshness and richness of the information available." While another student echoed, "Technology stimulates interest in learning and allows students to actively explore and find the right answers."

On the contrary, concerns were expressed about the challenges of using technology in learning Chinese culture. Particularly revealing were how the participants described their experience on Chinese culture learning online relating to degrees of accuracy, reliability and relevance of information, and fear of overuse. It is worth noting that there seemed to be a tendency to rely heavily on technology, resulting in reduced real-life communication and creativity. One individual stated that "using technology to learn Chinese culture could potentially lose the element of direct communication and the pragmatic aspect of language." Moreover, another reported problem was a lack of clear focus and guidance when there was an abundance of opportunities for Chinese culture content to be explored by students. As one student put it, "Learning a lot of information within a short period of time sometimes makes me feel overwhelmed and lost."

RQ4: *To what extent does this intensive cultural program enhance students' Chinese language learning? (Qs1–3)*

The participants on the whole recognised the importance of cultural study in Chinese language learning and valued the opportunity offered by this intervention program. The responses to RQ4 could be grouped into the following three broad themes: (1) benefits for language learning, such as effective communication; and increased learning motivation and curiosity; (2) a new perspective of thinking; and (3) future career enhancement.

Firstly, the themes of close relationship of culture and language, and benefits for language learning recurred throughout the dataset. When considering cultural study in CFL, the more Chinese culture they learned, the more motived they became while learning Chinese language. A few students stressed this point through these remarks, "a better understanding of Chinese culture makes it more interesting to learn Chinese", "getting to know Chinese culture makes learning Chinese easier and more practical", "a deeper understanding of Chinese culture helps to learn the language more effectively", and "understanding Chinese culture will increase interest in Chinese language learning". In addition, there was a sense of effective communication through learning culture, one student said, "understanding culture is of great help to communicate with people in real life".

Secondly, a new way of thinking could be developed through cultural learning, just as one student said, "learning about culture can broaden one's horizons and give one a new perspective on one's own culture. Because the culture of each country is different, it is beneficial to learn the culture of other countries." Additionally, another student commented on the unique characteristic of Chinese culture, "Chinese culture is one of the oldest and most complex culture in the world, and it has an influence on a vast geographical region of Southeast Asia including Vietnam".

In addition to future career enhancement, many students mentioned the importance of learning Chinese for their future career opportunities. One student mentioned, "Integrating Chinese culture into language learning gives us better job opportunities because there are many Chinese investors building factories in Vietnam". So they believe that learning Chinese will enhance their opportunities to find a job, thereby, they consider Chinese language to be a useful tool for future employment.

7. Discussion

This study found that CFL students at this subject Vietnamese university acknowledged the significant role of Chinese culture in their language learning. Even though there was a lack of learning about Chinese culture in a target-language environment under the current situation, students were keen to study Chinese culture by engaging in this intervention program at the end of the year 2021. The following section reported on some highlights generated in the findings.

In line with the quantitative findings from the questionnaire, the qualitative results indicated that all the students of the three-year groups believed that visual materials, particularly movies or Chinese TV drama series, were the fastest way to learn cultural knowledge. This is supported by Xing (2006) [51] observation on students spending time watching Chinese movies or reading Chinese books to learn about Chinese culture. "All these visual resources provide ample evidence of the distinctiveness of Chinese culture and its differences from learners' own cultural life worlds" [51] (p. 151). In particular, for learners who do not have the opportunity to go abroad, using foreign movies has proven helpful in promoting cultural awareness [52]. However, these data must be interpreted with caution because foreign movies may create cross-cultural stereotypes as well [53]. Although all the year groups preferred to explore Chinese culture through online resources, each group seemed to have different preferences. This was in accordance with the review study [13], and researchers argued most people who learn languages and cultures have turned to online media to communicate.

Another important finding is that the 2nd and 3rd Year groups showed great interest in the differences between Chinese and Vietnamese cultures, and they were ready to develop their intercultural communicative competence in learning Chinese, which was echoed by [15,54]. Students believed that comparing the target culture with their own culture helped them to see "real" people speaking the target language and to be aware of how culture affected individuals' thinking and behaviours. Just as one second-year student said, "Because Chinese and Vietnamese cultures are similar, we can make comparisons to improve our knowledge." This learning approach also brought about an "enriching appreciation" of their own culture and perception of their cultural identity.

On the question of using technology, many students commented that learning culture with the aid of technology is fast, efficient, and ubiquitous, especially under pandemic conditions. These comments were consistent with the study by [55], which found that foreign language learners can link anywhere and at any time to access appropriate material and learning information. This is because developments in technology have opened up access to cultural resources from all over the world [56]. Furthermore, as witnessed by this present research, cultural learning is closely associated with teachers' guidance. In the study by [57], they discovered that teacher instructional practices influenced students' language learning with technology outside the classroom in two cultural contexts: Hong Kong and America. Lyu and Qi (2020) [58] also emphasised the influence of teachers in enhancing students' self-management and self-monitoring in their language learning when using technology.

8. Conclusions and Limitations

Due to the lack of cultural study in an ideal target language environment, the present study was designed to explore the effects of an intervention program on Chinese culture among CFL students at a Vietnamese university. This study has found that generally CFL

students at this university were highly motived in learning Chinese language, and they are keen to learn Chinese culture. The analysis of quantitative data suggested that there was no significant difference among the students. Furthermore, the analysis of qualitative data has been synthesised to present overall findings in the interest of cultural study in CFL. Only important themes were reported as a foundation to explore the effects of this cultural intervention program. In general, it was observed that genders and different year groups were the two key factors impacting the students' strategies when acquiring CK and developing CA and CC. Male participants tended to value the opportunity to learn Chinese culture through real-life communication with people who can speak Chinese language, while female ones were interested in exploring Chinese culture using a diverse range of multimedia cultural resources. This is particularly interesting given the common challenges associated with learning culture with modern technology indicated by the qualitative data. In terms of students in different years of study, the current data suggested that the 1st Year students explored Chinese culture mainly out of curiosity; the 2nd Year students were eager to get teachers' guidance in finding out the differences between Chinese and Vietnamese cultures; the 3rd Year students expected to learn more about Chinese culture in order to improve cultural communication skills.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that one of the more significant findings to emerge from this study was that both male and female participants strongly believed that teachers were the key to cultivating Chinese cultural learning. Language teachers need to point out the culturally appropriate way to use language in specific situations and explore culturally based linguistic differences to promote understanding instead of misconceptions or prejudices [59]. However, Luk (2012) [60] mentioned that even though teachers had a positive attitude towards culture in language teaching, they were uncertain about how to incorporate culture in language classes or "hesitate to implement cultural elements into language teaching" [51] (p. 263).

Overall, the findings of this research study underscored the implementation of this plausible cultural intervention program given the fact that culture, especially Chinese culture, is very much "a complex and multifaceted subject for scholars, educators, and students alike to study, teach, and learn" [51] (p. 242). Therefore, Xing (2006) [51] proposes her theory of learnability and argued that "culture proficiency must progress in line with language proficiency" [61] (p. 159) as linguistic knowledge seemed to become an obstacle for teachers and students in addressing culture more systematically and comprehensively [62]. Most importantly, these findings have significant theoretical and practical implications for understanding the nature of Chinese culture in Chinese language learning, as well as "how Chinese culture learning is best integrated into learning to be active and effective communicators in Chinese" [61] (p. 163). However, it is still debatable how to incorporate culture into language teaching regarding objectivity and strategies [63]. Moreover, from an intercultural perspective, learning Chinese language and culture is necessarily intercultural in nature, involving the interaction of two language systems and two cultural codes [61].

Despite the findings discussed above, this study is limited by the fact that it only surveyed a limited number of CFL students from one university. The results may not be applicable to other universities in Vietnam. First, the study was only offered for a short period of time during the final exam time at the chosen university. This might have some implications on students' participation given the tight and busy class schedules. Second, only Years 1, 2, and 3 CFL students were given the opportunity to attend the program, while Year 4 students were in their final year of practice. This might have some effects on the findings because of their relatively high level of Chinese language proficiency and long learning experience. Nguyen (2017) [32] stated language education should give learners opportunities to develop CK, CA, and CC of both the target culture and their own culture and suggested that further research is needed to examine learners of different language levels. By comparing the results of different genders and year groups, bearing in mind the possible bias in these responses, the findings may inform CFL practitioners to take effective teaching methods catering for learners with various Chinese language proficiencies.

Third, the reality of gender imbalance in CFL learners at the university may have been a factor in the research findings. Moreover, this research focused on students' perceptions of this intervention, which might miss some critical aspects in CFL teaching and learning. The current investigation was unable to analyse these variables. In spite of its exploratory nature, this study offered valuable insights into pedagogical opportunities which facilitate Chinese culture learning of CFL students in a non-target language environment.

With respect to these limitations, future research needs to include all the year-level CFL students and extend the length of the program in order to get a holistic picture of cultural research in CFL course. In doing so, it enables CFL educators and practitioners to devise credible intervention strategies to promote Chinese cultural study. Student and teacher perceptions, engagement could measure the effectiveness of the intervention, and further backed by the reasonable length of the program. Future studies on the following aspects are therefore recommended: first, more sustainable and systematic planning required to ensure the design of a meaningful cultural invention program that can better support the formal university curriculum; second, taking full advantage of the accessibility and flexibility of abundant cultural information online to enhance CFL learners' motivation to learn culture sustainably; third, optimising CFL learners' learning strategies to warrant a positive bearing on their learning experience. Thus, with systematic and integrated cultural teaching, students' cultural competence can be developed along with their language competence [64]. Likewise, understanding how students perceive the additional learning opportunity may foster lifelong learning as students learn to navigate and comprehend Chinese language and culture through real-world tasks in the online environment [65]. It is envisaged that the present study will shed light on the mechanism underlying cultural learning and teaching in CFL. This may not only help CFL educators to design a nation-specific framework of Chinese cultural teaching, but also for CFL students to construct cultural competence in the target language environment of Sinosphere in the future.

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