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Fostering Cultural Self-Awareness through Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Case Study of EFL Pedagogy in Chinese Higher Education

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Received: 30 June 2026; **Revised:** 14 July 2026; **Accepted:** 27 August 2026; **Published:** 18 September 2026

Abstract: In many Chinese university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, culture is still presented as a collection of factual information regarding festivals, foods, and other visible symbols. Students may recognize these items without being able to explain what they mean or to discuss Chinese cultural experience critically in English. This study develops and examines a localized Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) sequence designed to foster cultural self-awareness and cultural narrative competence through three stages: critically unpacking cultural representations, comparing local and foreign cultural practices, and producing multimodal narratives. A single-group pre-post mixed-methods case study was conducted with 29 first-year engineering students at a local university over a 16-week semester. Evidence came from Likert questionnaires, language tests, classroom worksheets and mind maps, oral presentations, and English vlogs assessed with a three-dimensional rubric for cultural self-awareness, linguistic performance, and multimodal production. The results show the largest gains in cultural self-awareness and multimodal storytelling, with more modest progress in linguistic accuracy. Classroom records suggest that comparative inquiry and hometown-based vlog work helped students move beyond naming cultural objects toward explaining their social and personal significance. These findings provide preliminary, triangulated evidence associated with the localized CRT sequence and illustrate how CRT can be operationalized through comparative inquiry and multimodal cultural narrative production in Chinese university EFL instruction. The study also offers an empirically grounded pedagogical model and a basis for further comparative research on culturally responsive EFL pedagogy.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Teaching; Cultural Narrative Competence; Intercultural Competence; Chinese EFL Undergraduates; Sociocultural Theory; Multimodal Literacy; Higher Education English Instruction

1. Introduction

Globalization has changed what universities expect foreign-language courses to accomplish. Intercultural competence is no longer an optional supplement to language practice; it is part of the central purpose of the course. Wang and Teo's structural equation modelling study, for example, treats critical cultural awareness as a component of intercultural competence and shows that cultural knowledge alone does not produce reflective awareness; intercultural competence and practical cross-cultural skills mediate that relationship [1]. For Chinese learners, this means that knowing the names of festivals or traditional crafts is only a starting point. Students also need opportunities to examine the historical development and value systems that give those practices meaning. Fei's account

of cultural self-awareness makes a similar distinction: cultural understanding involves more than recalling visible symbols; it requires working through the philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic ideas that have shaped Chinese civilization [2]. That kind of understanding can help students present local traditions as part of a diverse world rather than as isolated objects of national pride.

College English is therefore a place where language learning and the negotiation of cultural identity meet. Recent Chinese textbooks include more content on traditional Chinese culture, but textbook coverage is uneven, and what students learn depends greatly on how teachers frame and develop the content [3]. In practice, native culture is often reduced to short descriptions of customs, with little attention to the social history or value assumptions behind them [4]. Students consequently tend to possess disconnected impressions of their own culture and limited experience of discussing it in English [2,5]. The problem is not simply a lack of cultural information. It is also a lack of guided practice in turning familiar experience into an explanation that can be understood and generalized across cultural boundaries.

This study responds by using cultural narrative competence as its organizing outcome. The term brings together language performance, critical cultural literacy, and the formation of cultural identity. In Bruner's narrative identity theory, individuals make sense of themselves by arranging experience into stories and interpretive patterns [6]. Cultural narrative competence extends this idea to cross-cultural communication: individuals must be able to interpret inherited meanings, assess them, and reconstruct them for a particular audience [7]. The relationship with cultural self-awareness is reciprocal. Writing or telling a cultural story gives learners a concrete reason to examine what they have inherited, while a more developed self-awareness helps them avoid decorative or stereotyped narration.

Against this background, this study asks how a localized CRT approach can work in a Chinese university English classroom. It treats the classroom as a site of cultural negotiation and follows a simple sequence: students first examine their own cultural position, then use that position to engage with other cultural perspectives. The study addresses three questions:

RQ1: What CRT teaching path(s) can help EFL instructors conduct in-depth native cultural exploration in university English courses?

RQ2: What constitutes a localized CRT framework adaptable to Chinese higher education EFL classrooms?

RQ3: How can instructors effectively measure dynamic changes in students' cultural narrative competence and cultural self-awareness before and after intervention?

Alongside these exploratory questions, the study examines descriptive differences between two assessment points in four learner outcomes: cultural self-awareness, linguistic accuracy, multimodal digital construction, and cultural narrative competence, over the 16-week instructional cycle.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Its Core Pedagogical Frameworks

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) emerged from Geneva Gay's work on educational equity in the 1970s. Its original setting was the culturally and ethnically diverse American school system. Gay's central argument is that students' cultural backgrounds are resources for learning, not obstacles to achievement; teaching should activate those resources to reduce inequity [8]. This premise is also relevant to Chinese college English. When students are invited to bring family, community, and regional experience into English tasks, they have something meaningful to interpret and communicate. CRT can thus create room for both language practice and reflection on cultural identity.

Later work has made CRT more operational by emphasizing several complementary dimensions. A three-part institutional, personal, and instructional model calls for student-centered curricula that do not assume a single Western cultural viewpoint [9]. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy shifts attention from merely responding to identity toward sustaining and developing learners' cultural and linguistic resources [10]. Motivational accounts highlight an inclusive classroom climate, positive attitudes, meaningful tasks, and opportunities to demonstrate competence [11]. Instructional designs embedding cultural metacognition and CRT-informed oral communicative tasks have further expanded the pedagogical toolkit [12,13]. The intervention also incorporated multimodal composing, where students combined image, sound, speech, and writing to expand the semiotic resources available for meaning-making. These perspectives suggest a CRT design that links classroom relationships, cultural aims, motivation, and meaning-making rather than treating them as separate interventions.

2.2. Localized Adaptation of CRT in Chinese Higher EFL Education

Over the past decade, foreign language researchers in China have continuously explored localized transformation paths of CRT theory suitable for China's educational context. Liao and Li demonstrated that CRT strategies in oral English classrooms can effectively facilitate EFL learners' intercultural competence development by integrating learners' cultural backgrounds into communicative tasks [13]. Targeting the imbalance in ethnic minority regional college English teaching, Wang pointed out that CRT can convert students' native cultural resources into core teaching materials to ease cultural disconnection in language classrooms [14]. Kong and colleagues further explored EFL teacher engagement with CRT in Chinese rural schools through a multi-case study of eight teachers. Their findings identified four types of teacher engagement characterized by cognitive, emotional, and social aspects, and revealed that both internal factors (teachers' beliefs, motives) and external factors (working contexts, national guidelines, high-stakes testing regimes) influenced teachers' CRT practices [15].

Recent Chinese scholarship has established that CRT is theoretically compatible with EFL teaching, but the empirical base remains thin. Reviews of cross-cultural communicative competence in Chinese higher education still find a strong emphasis on theory, teacher perceptions, and isolated assessment instruments, with fewer classroom interventions that others can reproduce [16]. Guo and Guo argue that foreign-language teaching should return students to the spiritual and cultural resources of their own communities so that cross-cultural dialogue is based on greater self-awareness [17]. The existing literature points in that direction, yet it rarely shows in detail how a full teaching sequence works over a semester or how changes in cultural interpretation can be documented before and after instruction.

2.3. Cultural Narrative Competence and Cultural Self-Awareness

Though early academic literature rarely adopts the unified concept of cultural narrative competence, multiple research branches have explored the internal connection between narrative practice, cultural authenticity, and multilingual identity development. From the cognitive psychology perspective, Bruner's narrative identity theory holds that individuals construct self-identity through internal cultural narrative organization; narrative skill training can drive students to sort out personal life experiences into logical interpretive frameworks, thereby deepening cultural self-awareness [6]. The Funds of Knowledge theory advocates tapping students' family and community cultural reserves as teaching materials, which can reduce learners' cognitive pressure and increase their confidence in second-language output [18]. Hull and Nelson's (2005) analysis of multimodal composition shows how meaning is distributed across and emerges from the orchestration of linguistic, visual, and other semiotic resources. Rather than treating multimodality as an additive art in which images supplement words, they argue that the braiding of modes produces a qualitatively different kind of meaning. This emergent meaning transcends the contribution of any single resource, thereby enabling learners to connect personal experience with broader cultural significations in ways that neither language nor image could achieve alone [19]. Within foreign language classroom contexts, Harper's systematic review of ICC pedagogical practices, grounded in Byram's intercultural *savoirs* framework, demonstrates that diverse teaching approaches, ranging from critical incident exercises and photograph-mediated tasks to narrative immersion and film-based projects, can effectively develop learners' intercultural competence and critical cultural awareness, even in environments without direct intercultural contact [20].

Two gaps follow from this review. First, CRT and intercultural communication theories were largely developed in Western, multi-ethnic settings; their use in a relatively homogeneous Chinese university context still needs classroom-based evidence. Second, studies of narrative production, cultural resources, and identity development have generally proceeded on separate tracks. This study addresses both issues by proposing a three-stage localized CRT sequence and examining its relationship with students' cultural self-awareness and cultural narrative competence through mixed qualitative and descriptive quantitative evidence.

3. A Case Study of Localized CRT in Chinese University EFL Teaching

3.1. Research Design

The study used a single-group, mixed-methods case study integrating descriptive quantitative and qualitative evidence. The quantitative strand provides descriptive comparisons of students' cultural and linguistic performance across the assessment points, while the qualitative strand examines what students did with cultural ideas

during the course. This combination matters because score differences alone cannot show how learners’ interpretations changed, whereas classroom artifacts do not provide a common basis for group-level quantitative comparison. The two strands therefore inform one another, although the absence of a control group and the non-equivalence of the two performance tasks mean that the design cannot establish a causal effect.

Participant recruitment started after the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the authors’ institution. Recruitment drew on one intact first-year engineering class at a local university in Xi’an, China, during Spring 2026. Purposive sampling guided selection: the instructor (first author) possessed curricular autonomy for the focal unit, and every enrolled student (N = 29) satisfied inclusion criteria: first-year engineering standing, CET-4 registration, and no previous exposure to culturally responsive pedagogy. Participation was voluntary and based on written informed consent. At the initial class meeting, researchers orally outlined the study’s aims, procedures, risks, and benefits, distributed hard-copy informed-consent forms in Chinese, and underscored that refusal or withdrawal would carry no academic penalty. All 29 students signed written informed-consent forms. The intervention occupied one full semester (16 weeks), totaling 48 contact hours delivered as two 90-min sessions weekly. Data were gathered in four waves: Week 1 (baseline questionnaires and language tests), Week 2 (pre-intervention oral presentation), Week 13 (group worksheets and mind maps), and Week 16 (post-intervention vlogs).

Neither source of evidence was sufficient on its own. Questionnaires and rubric scores can register a change in reported attitudes or performance but cannot explain the reasoning that produced it. Conversely, thematic analysis can reveal shifts in students’ cultural thinking but does not provide a standardized basis for comparing starting and ending points. We therefore used baseline assessments to describe the size and direction of change and coded student work to examine the interpretive processes behind those patterns. The resulting account is triangulated, but it remains non-causal.

Quantitative data collection included two pre-intervention baseline assessments arranged in the first teaching week. First, a self-report questionnaire with 5-point Likert scales was designed to measure students’ affective and attitudinal learning status, covering five dimensions: instrumental L2 learning motivation, intrinsic L2 learning motivation, cultural literacy participation willingness, self-evaluated cultural vocabulary knowledge, and cross-cultural critical thinking self-efficacy [21]. All scale items were transformed into specific behavioral judgment descriptions to guarantee construct validity, rather than vague overall self-evaluation statements [22–24]. Items were adapted from validated instruments and vetted by two applied-linguistics scholars. A pilot with 15 students in a parallel section verified item clarity and produced a full-scale Cronbach’s α of 0.83. Though self-report data capture learners’ subjective perceptions rather than objectively gauged ability, international intercultural education research widely recognizes its value in reflecting learners’ self-efficacy, cultural awareness, and cross-cultural communication willingness [23]. Consequently, questionnaire results should be read as proxies for perceived rather than verified competence. The complete questionnaire is attached as **Appendix A**, and **Table 1** lists the questionnaire’s structural composition and representative test items.

Table 1. Student Academic Attitudinal and Affective Baseline Survey.

Dimension	No. of Items	Adaptations/Sources	Sample Behavioral Indicator/Item
Instrumental L2 Learning Motivation	6	Noels et al. [24]	<i>Mastering English facilitates the completion of various coursework and academic tasks throughout my university years.</i>
Intrinsic L2 Learning Motivation	6	Noels et al. [24]	<i>Talking and writing in English brings me pleasure and intellectual excitement.</i>
Cultural Literacy Participation Willingness	5	Noels et al. [24]	<i>I am happy to communicate with peers from different cultural backgrounds.</i>
Self-Evaluated Cultural Vocabulary Knowledge	5	Developed for this study	<i>I know appropriate English words and expressions to describe Chinese cultural concepts and practices.</i>
Cross-Cultural Critical Thinking Self-Efficacy	5	Byram [25]	<i>I can critically analyze the cultural values embedded in foreign traditions and media.</i>

The second quantitative baseline assessment is a standardized language proficiency test aligned with China’s CET-4 difficulty level, covering listening, reading, writing, oral expression, and Chinese cultural translation, with each module’s full score set at 10 points to balance receptive and productive skill measurement.

Qualitative evidence came from two related classroom tasks. In Week 2, students gave an in-class presentation on Chinese traditional cuisine, as illustrated by **Figure 1**, which shows a screenshot of a student’s presentation

slide. Two trained EFL teachers scored each presentation independently with a three-dimensional analytic rubric covering cultural self-awareness, linguistic accuracy and complexity, and multimodal digital presentation (see **Appendix B**). The rubric was adapted from validated intercultural assessment tools [25] and tailored to the focal unit's learning objectives by the research team.



Figure 1. Screenshot of a student-created presentation slide introducing Chinese cuisine.

In Week 16, students used the same rubric for individual English vlogs about a local specialty food. Inter-rater reliability for the rubric scoring across both evaluation points was calculated using the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) two-way random model, achieving an agreement level of $ICC = 0.88$, indicating high scoring consistency between the two evaluators. Week 13 worksheets, mind maps, and narrative drafts were coded thematically to provide process evidence. Together with the questionnaires, language test results, presentation scores, and vlog scores, these data offer multiple sources of evidence that support a triangulated interpretation of the findings.

3.2. Research Participants

The research participants were 29 first-year undergraduates majoring in engineering at a Xi'an university with rich historical and cultural heritage, including 19 male students and 10 female students aged 17–19. Participants originated from 17 provinces across China, representing a wide range of regional cultural backgrounds. This diversity was intentionally incorporated into the instructional design. During the collaborative inquiry stage, groups were formed to include students from different provinces whenever possible, enabling members to contribute distinct hometown food traditions and cultural experiences to the comparative discussions. Rather than serving only as a demographic characteristic, participants' regional diversity functioned as an instructional resource consistent with the principles of CRT.

Because the class was intact, curricular constraints and the teacher-researcher's instructional freedom dictated single-group selection, a choice that inherently narrows generalizability. Every participant signed written informed consent following a detailed briefing in Chinese and was assured that withdrawal would not influence course grades.

To protect confidentiality, the researchers replaced participants' names with codes and removed identifying details from worksheets, transcripts, and vlogs before analysis. Electronic files were stored in password-protected storage accessible only to the research team. Findings were reported in aggregate, and quotations were presented without names or other directly identifying information.

All participants possessed a solid basic English foundation and positive learning attitudes. Their college entrance examination English scores ranged from 100 to 135 points (full score 150), with an average score of 110.5

points. However, two baseline assessments implemented in the first week revealed three prominent learning deficiencies restricting their cultural narrative competence development.

First, students showed an obvious imbalance in learning motivation: high instrumental motivation coexisted with insufficient intrinsic interest. As shown in **Table 2**, participants' average instrumental learning motivation score reached 4.66/5 (SD = 0.42), and cultural literacy participation willingness averaged 4.45/5 (SD = 0.51), indicating students recognized English learning's practical value and were willing to join cultural learning activities. Nevertheless, their intrinsic learning motivation only averaged 3.27/5 (SD = 0.71). Most students learned English driven by external goals such as passing CET-4/6, IELTS, and TOEFL exams to satisfy graduation, postgraduate admission, and employment requirements. This utilitarian learning orientation made students easily ignore in-depth cultural reflection and cross-cultural meaning construction emphasized by CRT teaching.

Table 2. Pre-Intervention Students' Attitude and Emotion Baseline Statistics (N = 29).

Measurement Dimension	Mean (1-5)	SD
Instrumental L2 Learning Motivation	4.66	0.42
Intrinsic L2 Learning Motivation	3.27	0.71
Cultural Literacy Participation Willingness	4.45	0.51
Self-Evaluated Cultural Vocabulary Knowledge	2.10	0.74
Cross-Cultural Critical Thinking Self-Efficacy	2.35	0.69

Second, as digital native youth, participants were accustomed to fragmented, short-form information reading, which affected their in-class deep thinking efficiency. Though all students relied on online digital platforms to acquire daily information, most could not maintain long-term focused reflection during group cultural discussions, hindering the formation of systematic cultural awareness and an analysis of complex cultural phenomena.

Third, there existed a prominent gap between students' learning motivation and their actual cultural output ability. **Table 3** displays baseline language skill test results: receptive skills, reading (71%) and listening (70%), maintained relatively high proficiency, whereas productive skills were comparatively weaker, with writing scoring 61%, translation 58%, and oral expression only 56%. This skill imbalance suggested that current English teaching may still lean towards exam-oriented input training, lacking sufficient authentic output practice scenarios. The productive ability deficiency was further aggravated by students' weak cultural expression foundation: the average self-evaluated cultural vocabulary knowledge score was merely 2.10/5, and cross-cultural critical thinking self-efficacy averaged 2.35/5. Students could understand cultural content in reading materials, but struggled to organize coherent English narratives containing profound native cultural connotations.

Table 3. Pre-Intervention Basic Language Skill Test Results (N = 29).

Knowledge Domain	Language Skill	Full Score	Mean Score	Rate (%)
Receptive	Reading	10	7.1	71%
	Listening	10	7.0	70%
Productive	Writing	10	6.1	61%
	Translating	10	5.8	58%
	Speaking	10	5.6	56%

The baseline results describe students who were willing to learn English but had limited practice using it to interpret and explain their own cultural experience. Their profile combined strong exam-oriented motivation with relatively weak intrinsic interest, receptive skills stronger than productive skills, and low confidence in cultural vocabulary and critical comparison. This profile made the class a suitable setting for a localized CRT sequence, while also setting a clear boundary on what the intervention could reasonably demonstrate.

3.3. Three-Stage CRT Classroom Implementation Design

The intervention was embedded in Unit 3, 'A Matter of Taste,' from the 2022 edition of New Future College English Integrated Course I (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press). The textbook unit presents Italian pizza through a Western vlog. We retained that material but broadened the unit's question to 'Food Symbols and the

Construction of Cultural Identity.' The revised sequence moved through three stages: critical analysis of a foreign cultural case, comparative inquiry using local cultural resources, and multimodal narrative production.

Stage 1: Critical Cultural Analysis. The first stage was to encourage students to move beyond a surface-level understanding of foreign culture by examining its historical and social dimensions. Rather than relying solely on the textbook vlog, the teacher incorporated documentary clips, historical photographs, and supplementary teaching materials to support classroom inquiry. Neapolitan pizza served as the focal case. Students explored its historical development, relationship with the social and economic history of Naples, role in regional identity, and recognition as intangible cultural heritage. These activities introduced a framework for analyzing cultural symbols as historically situated social practices, which was subsequently applied during the comparative inquiry stage.

Stage 2: Local Cultural Engagement & Cross-Cultural Comparative Inquiry. The second stage shifted attention from the foreign cultural example to students' own cultural experiences. Roujiamo, a representative local food, was selected as the comparison case. The 29 students (from 17 provinces across China) worked in six fixed collaborative groups to investigate the historical origins, symbolic meanings, everyday social functions, and cultural values associated with both Neapolitan pizza and roujiamo, using a comparative worksheet to examine their similarities and differences (see **Figure 2**). This arrangement allowed each group to draw upon multiple regional perspectives rather than a single local tradition. During group discussions, students were encouraged to introduce food customs from their own hometowns before jointly selecting representative examples for comparison with Neapolitan pizza and roujiamo. Although roujiamo served as the common comparison case because of the study's Xi'an setting, the wider range of regional experiences enriched classroom dialogue and provided additional qualitative evidence of students' engagement with diverse cultural perspectives.

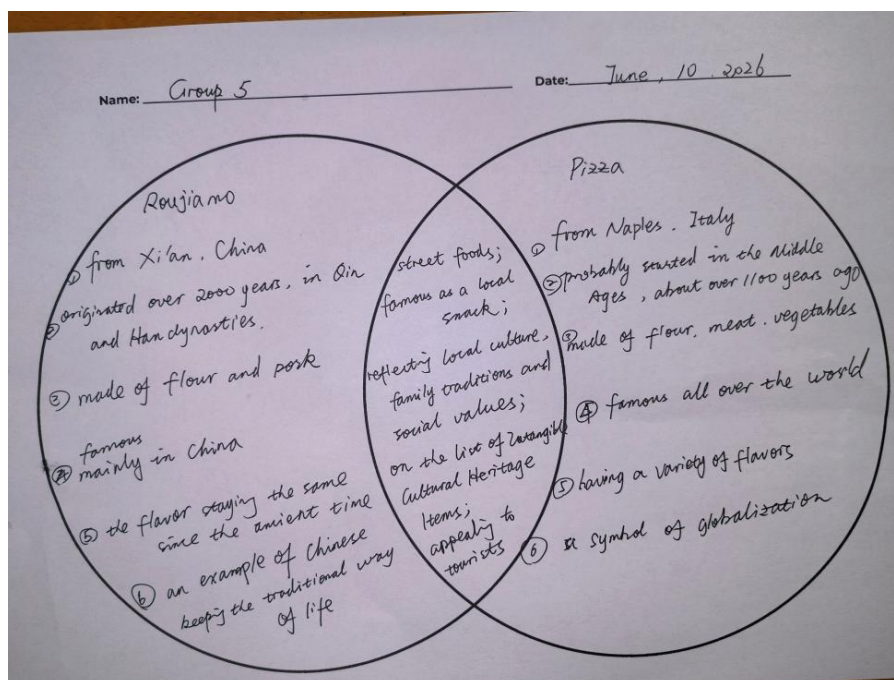


Figure 2. Students' Comparative Analysis of Roujiamo and Neapolitan Pizza.

Guided by structured inquiry tasks, students compared the two foods in terms of community life, cultural identity, and intergenerational cultural transmission. Throughout the inquiry, students collected information, synthesized evidence, and presented their findings in English, providing opportunities to integrate language use with cultural interpretation.

Stage 3: Multimodal Cultural Narrative Production. The final stage took place in Week 16. Each student produced an English vlog introducing a familiar local food to an international audience, as illustrated by **Figure 3**, which presents a screenshot from a student's vlog. The vlog assignment asked for more than a description. It required an explanation of the food's historical background, cultural practices, and symbolic meanings. Spoken English, home-

town imagery, and digital editing were woven into a coherent narrative. This interplay of modes carried cultural meanings that a verbal essay or a photo slideshow could not convey alone [19]. Students combined spoken English with images and basic video editing to create their narratives. Completed vlogs were uploaded to the course’s shared “Chinese Cultural Narrative Resource Library,” where they received teacher feedback and peer comments. The same three-dimensional rubric used in the Week 2 baseline assessment was applied to evaluate the final products, allowing descriptive comparison between the two assessment points. Because the two tasks differed in format, preparation conditions, and digital affordances, the resulting score differences should not be interpreted as direct measures of individual learning gains or improvement.



Figure 3. Screenshot of a student-produced vlog introducing a traditional Chinese local dish.

Figure 4 summarizes the overall instructional framework, illustrating the relationship among the pre-class diagnosis, in-class CRT activities, and post-class multimodal assessment.

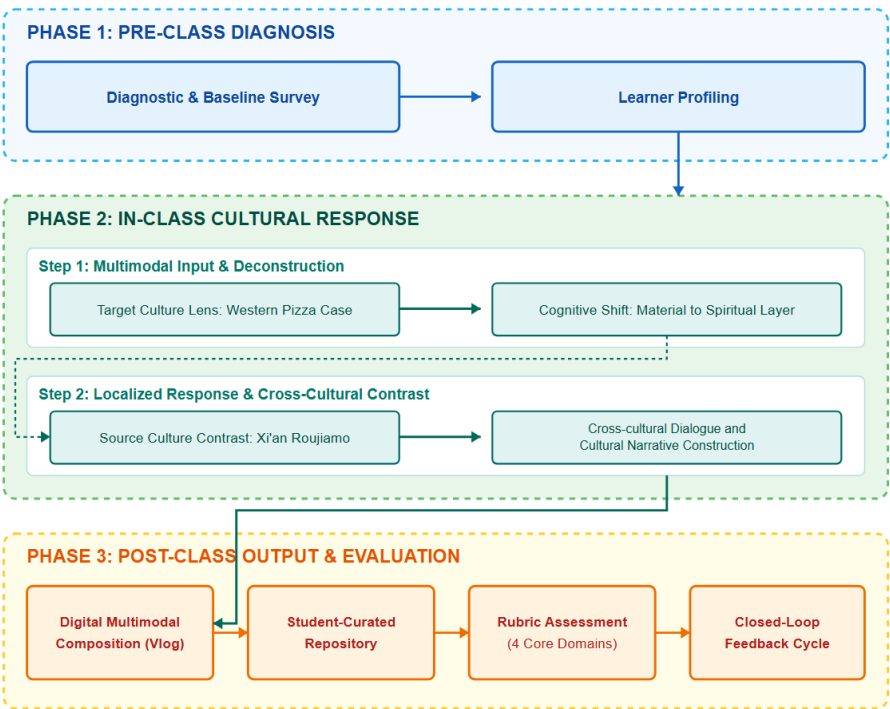


Figure 4. CRT Framework for Cultivating Learner Cultural Narrative Competence and Cultural Self-awareness.

3.4. Researcher Reflexivity and Trustworthiness Guarantee Strategies

Because the first two authors taught the course and had prior experience with cultural teaching reform, their interpretations could have been affected by favorable expectations about CRT. We addressed this risk through four procedures: independent coding, member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation across data sources. These measures do not remove researcher influence, but they make the interpretive process more visible and provide opportunities for disagreement to be identified.

Regarding inter-coder reliability, three researchers independently completed thematic coding of all student texts. Cohen's kappa was calculated at 0.86, indicating excellent coding agreement. Inconsistent coding units were discussed collectively, and the researchers reached unified classification standards. The baseline questionnaire itself showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.83). Concerning member checking, after completing preliminary thematic coding, researchers selected eight representative student works and returned them to the corresponding participants for content verification, confirming whether the coded cultural interpretation matched the students' original intentions.

Regarding peer debriefing, two university foreign language education experts uninvolved in this intervention independently reviewed all qualitative analysis results, putting forward revision suggestions for thematic classification logic. Concerning multi-source data triangulation, we integrated questionnaire quantitative data, language test scores, oral presentation transcripts, group worksheets, and post-class vlog materials to mutually verify research conclusions, avoiding one-sided judgments from single data sources.

4. Findings

The findings draw on three kinds of evidence: baseline measures of students' starting point, classroom artifacts showing how cultural narratives developed during the intervention, and post-intervention vlog scores. The sources point to an observed pattern of descriptive differences across assessment points and qualitative development in students' cultural interpretation and multimodal production.

4.1. Qualitative Analysis of In-Class Cultural Narrative Construction under CRT Intervention

After the Stage 1 modelling work, students completed the Stage 2 comparative inquiry. We coded their group worksheets, mind maps, and English drafts using open, axial, and selective coding. Across the artifacts, students moved from naming or praising food items toward discussing relationships among food, place, language, and social memory. Three recurring dimensions are illustrated below with excerpts from student work.

Dimension 1: Regional and Humanistic Perspective. One student from Guangxi wrote: *"Roujiamo appears plain but brings a strong sense of fullness and warmth, just like local Xi'an residents and my roommates I meet here--they are reliable and never put on airs."* The comparison connects an everyday food with the student's experience of living in Xi'an. It is more than a comment on taste: the student uses food as a way to describe a regional social atmosphere. This is an early but clear move from observing an object to interpreting the cultural character attached to it.

Dimension 2: Civilization Heritage Comparative Perspective. Student Liu from Hubei province stated:

Both Italian pizza and Xi'an roujiamo originated from ordinary civilians' daily life. After thousands of years of historical development, roujiamo still retains its original production form, which can be regarded as a miniature of Chinese civilization: deep historical roots, stable cultural structure, and strong cultural continuity that cannot be easily assimilated by foreign cultures.

Liu's passage makes a broader comparison without treating the two foods as interchangeable. The shared connection with ordinary daily life becomes a starting point for discussing historical continuity and cultural identity. Terms such as 'cultural miniature' and 'cultural continuity' show the student extending a concrete example into a claim about how traditions persist. The excerpt suggests a more developed form of cultural self-awareness than the surface description targeted at the beginning of the course.

Dimension 3: Linguistic-Cultural Integrated Perspective. A Guizhou-originated student's worksheet recorded:

After group discussion and reference material sorting, I realized roujiamo is the abbreviation of 'meat sandwiched in bread', which retains the classical Chinese feature of omitting prepositions. I never imagined that

a simple food name could carry such profound linguistic and cultural heritage.

Here the student treats a word as evidence of cultural history. The discussion of the omitted preposition in the English gloss prompts reflection on how Chinese names encode relationships differently from English descriptions. The focus has shifted from introducing roujiamo to asking what its linguistic form reveals about the cultural object. That shift is consistent with the reflective dimension the intervention sought to develop.

4.2. Descriptive Comparison of Cultural Narrative Competence Rubric Scores across Two Assessment Points

After 16 weeks, students completed the hometown-food vlog task. The research team scored the vlogs with the same three-dimensional rubric used for the Week 2 presentations. **Table 4** reports the means, standard deviations, and mean changes. The Week 16 mean scores were higher than the Week 2 mean scores across all four reported outcomes; however, these differences are descriptive rather than evidence of individual-level gains. The sample was small, no control group was included, the individual scores were not matched across the two assessment points, and the two tasks differed in format and preparation conditions.

Table 4. Descriptive Comparison of Cultural Narrative Competence Rubric Scores across Two Assessment Points (N = 29).

Evaluation Dimension	Week 2 Pre-Test Average Score	Pre-Test SD	Week 16 Post-Test Average Score	Post-Test SD	Descriptive Mean Difference
Cultural Self-Awareness	2.42	0.68	3.78	0.59	+1.36
Linguistic Accuracy & Complexity	2.85	0.63	3.62	0.57	+0.77
Multimodal Digital Construction Ability	2.33	0.71	3.95	0.60	+1.62
Overall Cultural Narrative Competence	2.53	0.60	3.78	0.55	+1.25

The overall mean rose from 2.53 to 3.78. The largest change was in multimodal digital construction (+1.62), which is unsurprising given that the final task explicitly required speech, images, and editing. Cultural self-awareness increased by 1.36, matching the intervention's emphasis on interpreting rather than merely displaying cultural symbols. Linguistic accuracy and complexity increased by 0.77, a more modest change that is plausible for a skill requiring sustained practice. These differences indicate a pattern that is compatible with the instructional emphasis on cultural reflection and multimodal expression, but they should not be interpreted as evidence of improvement attributable to the intervention or estimates of causal efficacy.

5. Discussion

5.1. Core Teaching Mechanisms Associated with Observed Patterns in Learner Competence

This pattern was reflected not only in the higher Week 16 group mean for cultural self-awareness but also in classroom worksheets and narrative drafts, where students increasingly connected food traditions with regional identity, community values, and personal experience. These observations indicate that the intervention encouraged students to treat English as a tool for cultural interpretation rather than merely factual description. This interpretation is consistent with sociocultural perspectives on scaffolded learning and Bruner's view of narrative as a means of organizing experience [26,27].

This progression is also consistent with Darwin's reconceptualization of identity investment theory, which suggests that positioning learners as legitimate cultural narrators may strengthen their investment in both language learning and cultural meaning-making [28]. The multimodal vlog task provided a context in which this repositioning could be expressed through digital storytelling [29].

5.2. Four Interactive Mechanisms Associated with CRT Instructional Processes

The overall pattern can be interpreted through four complementary mechanisms rather than four independent processes. First, documentary clips, photographs, and cultural objects gave students semiotic resources with which to question their initial, simplified impressions [27]. The second mechanism concerns identity investment. As learners assumed the role of cultural narrators rather than knowledge recipients, they were encouraged to connect English use

with personally meaningful cultural experiences. This interpretation is consistent with Bruner's narrative perspective and Darwin's account of identity investment [6,28]. The third mechanism involves using students' local-world experiences as legitimate learning resources. This reduced the distance between classroom tasks and learners' lived experience, supporting culturally meaningful language production [18]. Finally, multimodal composition expanded the resources available for cultural expression by integrating speech, images, and video editing. This may help explain the comparatively larger descriptive mean difference observed in the multimodal dimension [26].

5.3. Theoretical and Pedagogical Contributions of This Research

The study suggests four related contributions. Conceptually, it brings CRT, intercultural communicative competence, and narrative identity into a single account of cultural narrative competence.

A further contribution of this study is pedagogical. It proposes a three-stage, localized CRT framework comprising foreign cultural decoding, native cultural re-interpretation, and multimodal narrative externalization. Rather than establishing a universally applicable model, the framework offers an example of how CRT principles can be operationalized into classroom activities that appear suitable for the Chinese university EFL context.

The study also reflects a methodological implication. By combining rubric-based assessment with qualitative classroom evidence, the study illustrates the potential value of mixed-methods triangulation for examining both observable learning outcomes and changes in students' cultural reasoning. These findings provide preliminary methodological insights that may inform future localized CRT research.

More broadly, the findings suggest that university EFL classrooms may serve as spaces where cultural self-reflection and identity formation can be encouraged, extending language instruction beyond purely instrumental objectives. While the findings are exploratory, they indicate the potential of English-mediated cultural narration to support higher education goals emphasizing both global communication and local cultural awareness.

5.4. Significance in Relation to Existing Research

The findings speak to CRT research in three ways. Recent studies have increasingly emphasized that culturally responsive pedagogy extends beyond the inclusion of cultural content. Kim [30] proposed guidelines for culturally and linguistically responsive instruction in higher education, highlighting the importance of valuing culturally diverse students' knowledge and experiences through curriculum, assessment, and instructional design. Similarly, Wesley-Nero [31] found that teachers enact culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy through culturally relevant curricula, recognition of students' full communicative repertoires, the rejection of deficit-based perspectives, and the development of critical consciousness. Kehl et al. [32] further showed that the implementation of CRT may be complicated by inconsistencies between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices, including unrecognized microaggressions, and emphasized the importance of critical consciousness in advancing equity. Against this background, this study extends existing CRT research by illustrating how culturally responsive principles can be incorporated into a semester-long instructional sequence in a Chinese university EFL classroom. Rather than examining teachers' beliefs or general instructional practices, this study provides classroom-based descriptive evidence of how structured narrative activities may create opportunities for students to engage with cultural experiences and perspectives.

Second, this study provides preliminary empirical evidence relevant to the critical cultural awareness dimension within Byram's classic intercultural communicative competence model. Recent research has examined the potential implications of CRT for students' educational experiences. Ialuna et al. [33], for example, found that teacher-student relationships were associated with students' school belongingness in ethnically diverse classrooms, while also highlighting the complex relationship between teachers' CRT self-efficacy and their relationships with immigrant and refugee students. These findings suggest that the significance of CRT may extend beyond instructional practices to students' relational and affective experiences. In this study, the higher Week 16 group mean for cultural self-awareness provides preliminary descriptive evidence relevant to the critical cultural awareness dimension. However, the non-equivalence of the Week 2 presentation and Week 16 vlog and the absence of matched individual pre-post data prevent the observed difference from being interpreted as demonstrated improvement. The pattern nevertheless suggests that structured narrative tasks may provide opportunities for students to compare cultural similarities and differences and reflect on their own cultural positions, warranting further investigation through matched and equivalent assessment designs.

Third, this study offers an exploratory classroom example for localized CRT studies in China. Recent research has started to provide more detailed empirical evidence concerning CRT in Chinese language education. Lan [34], for instance, reported a positive relationship between students' perceptions of culturally responsive teaching practices and their attitudes towards learning English among senior high school students in China. This finding provides contextual support for the relevance of CRT to English language learning in China, but the study was based on survey data rather than a classroom intervention. This study therefore adds a different type of evidence by examining a semester-long instructional sequence in a Chinese university EFL classroom and drawing on multiple sources of descriptive evidence. In this respect, the study complements existing Chinese research by illustrating how CRT principles may be translated into classroom practice at the university level. At the same time, the exploratory nature of the findings means that the transferability and effectiveness of the instructional framework should be examined through larger comparative studies involving diverse learner populations.

5.5. Limitations, Boundary Conditions, and Directions for Future Research

The findings should be interpreted in light of several methodological limitations. The single-group, non-randomized design cannot distinguish intervention effects from maturation, repeated testing, or Hawthorne effects. The sample consisted of 29 engineering students from a single university, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other institutional and disciplinary contexts. Questionnaire responses reflected students' self-reported perceptions and may have been influenced by social desirability. In addition, replacing the in-class presentation with an out-of-class vlog introduced differences in preparation time and digital affordances, particularly for multimodal performance. Although multiple sources of evidence were collected, the 16-week intervention provides little evidence regarding the long-term retention of intercultural learning outcomes.

The exploratory nature of this case study also constrained the statistical analysis. The primary purpose was to evaluate a localized CRT classroom intervention through descriptive quantitative results interpreted alongside qualitative evidence, rather than to test hypotheses or estimate statistically generalizable effects. Quantitative findings were presented descriptively, without paired-samples significance tests, confidence intervals, or effect sizes. Consequently, the observed score differences cannot be evaluated against chance variation or normal developmental progression. Moreover, because the final vlog assignment allowed students to prepare outside class, it is not possible to completely separate genuine reflective learning from knowledge supported through online information searching. Although classroom worksheets and mind maps captured students' immediate interpretive reasoning during guided inquiry, future studies could strengthen evidence by incorporating stimulated-recall interviews, process journals, delayed post-tests, and more rigorous inferential analyses within larger comparative designs.

Two boundary conditions should also be acknowledged when interpreting the educational implications of this study. First, food culture functioned as an accessible entry point rather than a comprehensive representation of Chinese civilization. While comparative activities encouraged students to connect culinary practices with broader themes such as cultural continuity, collective identity, and regional diversity, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic traditions were only partially addressed. Broader curricular designs integrating these dimensions would therefore be needed to support claims about comprehensive cultural learning. Second, the findings should not be generalized uncritically across academic disciplines. Engineering students may differ from students in the arts, humanities, or social sciences in their prior cultural knowledge, learning motivations, and engagement with intercultural topics. Future multi-site studies involving students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds would help establish the transferability and boundary conditions of the pedagogical approach.

6. Conclusions

This mixed-methods case study offers an empirically grounded example of a three-stage localized CRT sequence for fostering cultural narrative competence in Chinese university EFL instruction. The descriptive comparison showed the largest mean differences in multimodal narrative competence and cultural self-awareness, while linguistic performance showed a smaller difference. Comparative work and hometown-food vlogs gave students reasons to connect English practice with the interpretation of cultural experience. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence provides a triangulated account of the observed patterns across assessment points and illustrates how CRT principles can be operationalized through culturally grounded and multimodal classroom activities. The findings are consistent with

a reciprocal relationship between second-language learning and cultural identity work.

The study contributes to localized CRT research by bringing CRT into dialogue with intercultural communicative competence and narrative identity perspectives and by translating these perspectives into a concrete three-stage classroom sequence. Practically, the study offers three interconnected strategies centered on native cultural resources, comparative inquiry, and digital multimodal narrative tasks for university English instructors. Rather than presenting the sequence as a universally applicable model, the study provides an empirically grounded classroom example that can inform adaptation and further investigation in other Chinese university EFL contexts.

Beyond the immediate classroom context, these findings also have broader implications for the role of English education in the internationalization of Chinese higher education. In this context, CRT provides a possible pedagogical approach for integrating English language development with cultural self-awareness and students' capacity to communicate Chinese cultural perspectives. The approach suggests that English education may serve not only as preparation for international communication but also as a platform for students to develop the capacity to participate in intercultural dialogue from an informed understanding of their own cultural backgrounds.

The conclusions are limited by the single-site engineering sample, the one-semester intervention, the reliance on questionnaires and rubric scores, the absence of a control condition, and the lack of inferential testing. The reported means and mean differences should therefore be treated as descriptive and exploratory. Future studies could use multi-site longitudinal designs, matched comparison groups, and discourse or process data to test whether the CRT sequence produces durable changes across disciplines.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, J.H. and X.T.; Methodology, J.H.; Software, R.Y.; Validation, J.H. and X.T.; Formal Analysis, J.H.; Investigation, X.T.; Resources, X.T.; Data Curation, R.Y.; Writing—Original Draft Preparation, J.H.; Writing—Review & Editing, J.H. and X.T.; Visualization, R.Y.; Supervision, X.T.; Project Administration, J.H.; Funding Acquisition, J.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by the Educational Science Planning Project Fund of Shaanxi Province under the 14th Five-Year Plan (Grant No. SGH25Y2763), the 2025 University-level Grassroots Teaching Organization Construction Project Teaching Team for Specialized English Courses of Sino-Foreign Joint Majors of Xi'an University of Posts and Telecommunications, and the Research Project of the Sports Bureau of Shaanxi Province (Grant No. 20261554).

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Foreign Studies of Xi'an University of Posts and Telecommunications (protocol code YJLL2026007, and date of approval: March 2026).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

The authors appreciate the 29 students for generously sharing their genuine thoughts and perspectives during the research. The authors also extend their deep gratitude to the editors and reviewers for their valuable comments and recommendations.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During manuscript preparation, the authors used AI-based language-polishing tools for limited assistance with wording and sentence-level expression. AI tools were not used for statistical analysis, interpretation of results, development of the theoretical framework, or generation of the study's core scientific content. Every assisted passage was reviewed and revised by the authors, who accept responsibility for the manuscript's accuracy, originality, and integrity.

Appendix A. Student Academic Attitudinal and Affective Baseline Survey

Instructions: This questionnaire is created to record undergraduate learners' real learning mindsets, daily language study habits, and cross-cultural interaction readiness during college English courses. Please go through every item thoroughly and tick the rating that most matches your personal, genuine thoughts. The five-point rating scale is defined as follows:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD)
- 2 = Disagree (D)
- 3 = Neutral (N)
- 4 = Agree (A)
- 5 = Strongly Agree (SA)

Table A1. Dimension 1: Instrumental L2 Learning Motivation (6 Items).

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Mastering English facilitates the completion of various coursework and academic tasks throughout my university years.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Solid English competence can raise my chances of securing satisfactory jobs after graduation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Proficiency in English supports my preparation for postgraduate entrance examinations and advanced studies.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Having good English skills enables me to sign up for overseas exchange and international campus activities.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I devote time to learning English to strengthen my overall competitiveness in future professional fields.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Excellent English ability gives me an edge over other applicants in worldwide recruitment markets.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Table A2. Dimension 2: Intrinsic L2 Learning Motivation (6 Items).

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Talking and writing in English brings me pleasure and intellectual excitement.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel fulfilled when I share my daily experiences and personal viewpoints using English.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am willing to actively take part in all kinds of English-themed classroom activities.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I gain a strong sense of achievement every time I notice progress in my English ability.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I keep learning English out of curiosity about new knowledge and foreign cultures.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would still choose to study English consistently even without course credit requirements.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Table A3. Dimension 3: Cultural Literacy Participation Willingness (5 Items).

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I am happy to communicate with peers from different cultural backgrounds via English.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Studying English broadens my horizons and helps me appreciate diverse cultural value systems.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am curious about the unique customs and cultural features of English-speaking regions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am eager to present Chinese traditional culture to foreign audiences in oral English.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
English acts as a useful medium for me to pass on Chinese cultural stories to global readers.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Table A4. Dimension 4: Self-evaluated Cultural Vocabulary Knowledge (5 Items).

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I know appropriate English words and expressions to describe Chinese cultural concepts and practices.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I can use English vocabulary to explain cultural traditions and customs.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When discussing culture in English, I can usually find the right words to express my ideas.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I can explain culture-specific concepts in English without relying solely on literal translation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am confident in using English vocabulary to communicate cultural knowledge and experiences from my own cultural background.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Table A5. Dimension 5: Cross-cultural Critical Thinking Self-Efficacy (5 Items).

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I can critically analyze the cultural values embedded in foreign traditions and media.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel confident comparing deep-level cultural differences between Eastern and Western customs.	○	○	○	○	○
I can evaluate cultural phenomena beyond surface-level stereotypes during class discussions.	○	○	○	○	○
I am able to express my own reasoned perspectives when encountering conflicting cultural viewpoints.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel capable of connecting everyday cultural practices to broader historical and social contexts.	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix B

Table A6. Analytic Rubric for Cultural Narrative Competence (Week 2 Baseline Oral Presentation Task and Week 16 Vlog Task).

Dimension	Level 1: Very Weak	Level 2: Weak	Level 3: Developing	Level 4: Good	Level 5: Excellent
Cultural Self-Awareness	Provides only a surface-level description of Chinese cuisine with no awareness of cultural meaning or personal positioning.	Limited cultural explanation with minimal awareness of cultural background or self-positioning.	Some attempt to explain cultural meaning, emerging awareness of cultural perspective, but mainly descriptive.	Clear interpretation of cultural meanings; shows awareness of cultural perspective and some reflection on personal positioning.	Deep interpretation of cultural meanings; strong reflection on cultural positioning and meaning-making processes; integrates cultural values and identity awareness.
Linguistic Accuracy and Sophistication	Frequent grammatical errors; very limited vocabulary; meaning is difficult to understand.	Noticeable grammatical and lexical errors; limited vocabulary and simple sentence structures.	Generally understandable; some grammatical errors; basic vocabulary range and sentence structures.	Mostly accurate grammar and appropriate vocabulary; uses some complex structures with minor errors.	High grammatical accuracy; wide and appropriate vocabulary; varied and complex sentence structures; fluent expression.
Multimodal Digital Construction	Minimal or no visual support; poor organization; little or no integration of speech and visuals.	Limited use of visuals; weak connection between spoken content and digital materials.	Basic use of visuals; partial integration with spoken content; some organizational issues.	Effective use of visuals and digital elements; clear integration with spoken content; well-structured presentation.	Highly effective multimodal integration; strong coordination of speech, visuals, and digital design; engaging and coherent presentation.

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