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Bridging the Communicative Gap: Exploring the Systematic Integration of Contemporary Chinese Internet Catchphrases into International Chinese Language Curricula

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Abstract

As China's global influence grows, the needs of Chinese language learners have become increasingly diversified, making their command of the "living language" ever more crucial. However, the update cycles of current international Chinese teaching materials struggle to keep pace with the rapid evolution of Chinese society, particularly its online language, resulting in a significant disconnect between what learners study and the realities of communication. Internet catchphrases, serving as a "barometer of social mentality", are a key window into understanding contemporary Chinese socio-cultural dynamics, yet they pose a major comprehension barrier for intermediate and advanced learners. To address this challenge, this study explores viable pathways for systematically integrating internet catchphrases into international Chinese teaching and proposes an innovative short-term course design.

Grounded in sociocultural theory and a three-dimensional model of cultural teaching, this research constructs a ten-session course titled " 'Geng' dong Zhongguo: Decoding Internet Catchphrases and Contemporary Social Sentiments". The course employs thematic instruction, organizing catchphrases around social issues such as the workplace, lifestyle, consumption, technology, and grassroots culture. Its core pedagogical innovation is the "Word-Meme-Context" trinity approach, which requires learners not only to master the words themselves but also to understand their cultural origins and use them appropriately in authentic contexts. The paper elaborates on the course syllabus, teaching objectives, and demonstrates specific teaching procedures using the "Workplace Survival Guide" lesson as an example.

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This paper argues for the course's core value in enhancing learners' communicative authenticity, fostering cultural insight, and stimulating learning motivation. Simultaneously, it addresses potential challenges such as the transient nature of catchphrases, the complexity of cultural interpretation, and heightened demands on teachers, proposing countermeasures focused on developing "meta-learning skills", deepening the teaching of "perspectives", and building teacher learning communities. Finally, the study offers implications for international Chinese textbook compilation, suggesting the inclusion of dynamic modules and promoting the digitalization of teaching materials. It advocates for international Chinese education to place greater emphasis on the social vitality of language, aiming to cultivate global citizens who are both proficient communicators and deeply culturally literate.

Keywords: *International Chinese Education; Internet Catchphrases; Course Design; Sociocultural Teaching; Intercultural Communicative Competence*

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

As China's role in global governance and the economic landscape continues to grow, the international influence of the Chinese language has increased correspondingly, leading to a diversification in the demographics and motivations of learners (Li, 2018). Alongside traditional learners aiming for academic studies or humanities research, a significant number of individuals are now learning Chinese for practical purposes such as business, work, technology cooperation, or in-depth tourism. This shift places new demands on international Chinese language education: learners must not only master standard and normative linguistic knowledge but also urgently need to develop competence in the "living language" that enables them to understand and participate in contemporary Chinese social communication.

However, a notable contradiction emerges: the compilation and update cycles of mainstream international Chinese teaching materials cannot keep pace with the rapid changes in Chinese society, particularly within its internet discourse. The relative lag in textbook content means it often fails to incorporate and reflect the plethora of online catchphrases that have emerged in recent years. These popular terms, such as *neijuan* (内卷：involution/rat race), *tangping* (躺平：to make a strategic retreat in the game of life one cannot win/to engage in a form of "quiet quitting), *yanhuoqi* (烟火气：vitality of everyday life), *banwei* (班味：the drudgery of office work), and *shuzhihua* (数智化：digital and intelligent transformation), have long transcended the boundaries of cyberspace, deeply permeating daily conversations, media reports, and even official discourse among Chinese people. They have become crucial linguistic codes for constructing contemporary Chinese social interaction and cultural identity. For second-language learners, a lack of familiarity with these terms can lead to a significant "pragmatic gap" and "cultural disconnect" when interacting with Chinese friends, browsing Chinese social media, or working and living in China. Consequently, despite having mastered standard grammar, learners may still feel confused and alienated in authentic communicative contexts.

Online catchphrases are far from mere linguistic games; they are regarded by academia as a "barometer of social mentality" and the "linguistic fossils of cultural change" (Tang, 2010, p. 58). Each high-frequency catchphrase encapsulates the collective public sentiment, psychological demands of specific groups, and shifts in values of a particular period. Therefore, learning them is essentially an act of decoding the dynamics of contemporary Chinese society and culture. Against this backdrop, this study poses a core research question: Within the framework of international Chinese education, how can we systematically design and implement a short-term course that not only efficiently helps intermediate-to-advanced learners grasp the linguistic forms and pragmatic functions of key online catchphrases but also guides them to deeply understand the underlying Chinese social sentiments, cultural trends, and group psychology reflected by these terms?

1.2 Literature Review

On a theoretical level, integrating cultural teaching into language learning has become a consensus within the field of international Chinese education. Byram's (1997) model of "intercultural communicative competence" emphasizes that language learners must move beyond instrumental skills to acquire the ability to understand different cultural perspectives and interact effectively and appropriately. Sociocultural theory further posits that language learning is a process of participation in specific sociocultural practices (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This provides a solid theoretical foundation for incorporating catchphrases—highly contextualized products of sociocultural practice—into teaching.

In domestic Chinese research, analyses of the linguistic features and socio-cultural connotations of online catchphrases are already quite substantial, with numerous scholars conducting in-depth explorations from the perspectives of linguistics, communication studies, and sociology (e.g., Tang, 2010). However, research on systematically transforming these findings into teaching resources remains relatively scarce. Existing studies mostly focus on introducing individual hot words (e.g., Song, 2021) or principle-based discussions suggesting they "can be included" in teaching (e.g., Wang, 2022), but they lack a comprehensive curriculum design framework that can be directly referenced by frontline educators. This gap in translating "theoretical research" into "teaching practice" is the critical point that this study aims to address.

1.3 Research Significance and Paper Structure

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it seeks to elevate the academic recognition of the pedagogical value of online catchphrases, transforming their status from "interesting supplements" in textbook appendices to core teaching resources for cultivating learners' cross-cultural insight and social empathy. Practically, this paper will use the " 'Geng' dong Zhongguo" ("梗"动中国：China Stirred by Memes) course as a case study to present a detailed, ten-session short-term curriculum design. This includes its theoretical framework, teaching objectives, thematic syllabus, teaching activities, and assessment methods, aiming to provide a highly operable blueprint for international Chinese language teachers.

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The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 will elaborate on the theoretical framework and core concepts of the course design. Section 3 will provide a detailed exposition of the overall design of the " 'Geng' dong Zhongguo" course and representative lesson plans. Section 4 will discuss the value of this course design, the challenges it may face, potential countermeasures, and its implications for future textbook compilation. Finally, Section 5 will present the conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework and Course Design Philosophy

2.1 Guidance from Sociocultural Theory

This course design is fundamentally guided by Sociocultural Theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This perspective posits that language learning transcends mere grammatical and lexical acquisition; it is a process of socialization into a specific cultural community. From this vantage point, online catchphrases are not peripheral linguistic curiosities but are central artifacts of contemporary Chinese sociocultural practice. Learning these terms, therefore, is synonymous with learning the modes of thinking, behavioral norms, and emotional expressions prevalent within the Chinese online and youth communities. It enables learners to move from being external observers to more engaged participants who can decipher the cultural codes embedded in everyday communication.

2.2 Application of the Three-Dimensional Cultural Teaching Model

To effectively unpack the multifaceted nature of catchphrases, the course employs a three-dimensional model of cultural teaching (Kramsch, 1993), which extends learning beyond static "products" to include "practices" and "perspectives".

Products (Cultural Artifacts): This dimension refers to the catchphrases themselves—their pronunciation, written form (including Chinese characters and Pinyin), and core semantic meaning. It constitutes the basic lexical knowledge that learners must acquire.

Practices (Cultural Behaviors): This dimension focuses on the usage of these terms in real-life contexts. It involves understanding the typical social scenarios, appropriate interlocutors, communicative functions (e.g., humor, sarcasm, solidarity), and tonal register (e.g., playful, self-deprecating) associated with each phrase.

Perspectives (Cultural Mindsets): This is the deepest dimension, addressing the underlying values, attitudes, and social psyche that the catchphrases reflect. For instance, decoding *banwei* involves exploring the widespread sense of workplace burnout among young Chinese, while understanding *songchigan* requires delving into the collective yearning for mental respite and a slower pace of life in a competitive society.

2.3 The "Word-Meme-Context" Trinity Pedagogy

Synthesizing the above theories, this course proposes an innovative core pedagogy: the "Word-Meme-Context" trinity approach. This methodology is designed to ensure a holistic grasp of each catchphrase.

Word (词): This layer involves teaching the basic linguistic components of the term: its definition, grammatical function, and common collocations.

Meme (梗): This layer, unique to the teaching of internet language, deciphers the term as a cultural code. It involves explicating its origin, etymology, and the humorous, ironic, or satirical cultural reference (the "meme") that gives it resonance and spreadability. For example, teaching *renlian pilaoban* (Face-shopped Plankton) necessitates showing the original *SpongeBob Square Pants* character and the AI-morphed images that created the meme.

Context (境): This layer anchors the word and its meme in authentic sociolinguistic practice. It involves presenting and analyzing real-world scenarios—through videos, social media screenshots, or dialogue simulations—where the term is used naturally. This allows learners to understand not just what a word means, but *when, why, and how* it is used by native speakers to achieve specific communicative goals.

This tripartite framework ensures that learners progress from superficial comprehension to deep, operational knowledge, enabling them to navigate the dynamic landscape of contemporary Chinese communication with greater cultural fluency.

3. Course Design Case: A Detailed Look at the " 'Geng' dong Zhongguo" Course

To translate the aforementioned theoretical framework into practice, we designed a short-term course titled " 'Geng' dong Zhongguo: Decoding Internet Catchphrases and Contemporary Social Sentiments". This course is intended to serve as an effective supplement to traditional Chinese language instruction, opening a vivid window into contemporary China for learners.

3.1 Overall Course Description

A. **Course Name**: " 'Geng' dong Zhongguo: Decoding Internet Catchphrases and Contemporary Social Sentiments"
B. **Course Objectives**:

Linguistic Competence: To master 30-50 high-frequency core internet catchphrases, enabling accurate comprehension and preliminary application in appropriate oral and written communication.

Cultural Cognition: To deeply understand contemporary Chinese social hot topics and group mentalities in areas such as the workplace, lifestyle, consumption, technology, and intergenerational relations through these catchphrases.

Communicative Strategy: To enhance confidence and ability in engaging in "grounded" communication with native Chinese speakers and to interpret social media content containing popular terms.

C. **Target Students**: Intermediate-to-advanced second language learners who have completed HSK Level 4 or possess an equivalent proficiency.
D. **Course Scale and Duration**: 10 sessions, 90 minutes each, recommended for small-class teaching (15-20 students).
E. **Course Features**:

Thematic and Modularized Instruction: Moving beyond vocabulary lists, the course categorizes and teaches catchphrases according to social themes, constructing a systematic knowledge framework.

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Multimedia and Authentic Material-Driven: Heavy use of authentic materials such as short videos, trending topic lists, memes, and blog posts as instructional input.

Task-Based and Production-Oriented: Each session incorporates tasks simulating real communicative scenarios, encouraging learning by doing, culminating in a comprehensive cultural report.

3.2 Syllabus Design and Rationale

The core design principle of the course syllabus is theme-led and vocabulary clustering. By placing related terms under a unified socio-cultural theme, it facilitates associative memory and deep understanding for students, as opposed to memorizing words in isolation. The table below presents the complete course syllabus.

Table: Syllabus for the " 'Geng' dong Zhongguo" Course

Session	Theme	Core Vocabulary Examples	Social Observation Focus
1	Intro: Welcome to the World of "Geng"	*Yingkong* (硬控：hard locked/to be transfixed), *Pofang* (破防：one's defenses are down/to be emotionally shattered), *Renlian Pilaoban* (人脸痞老板：Face-shopped Plankton/Human-faced Plankton)	Characteristics of Chinese internet culture, the generation and dissemination mechanisms of catchphrases
2	A Guide to Workplace Survival	*Banwei* (班味：the drudgery of office work), *Moyu* (摸鱼：skiving), *Neijuan* (内卷：involution/rat race), *Tangping* (躺平：to make a strategic retreat in the game of life one cannot win/to engage in a form of "quiet quitting" from societal pressures), *Dagongren* (打工人：laborer), Workplace PUA	Workplace pressures on the younger generation, sense of burnout, and self-adjustment philosophies
3	New Propositions for Life Aesthetics	*Songchigan* (松弛感：sense of relaxation), *Yanhuoqi* (烟火气：vitality of everyday life), *Jingshen Neihao* (精神内耗：mental internal consumption), *Nongren/Danren* (浓人/淡人：saturated/desaturated person; high-key/low-key person)	The yearning for inner peace and authentic life in a rapidly developing society
4	Modes of Youth Agency	*Tezhongbing Shi Lvyou* (特种兵式旅游：special forces-style travel/blitz tour), *Dazi* (搭子：partner), *Xianyanbao* (显眼包：attention-seeker), *Chong* (冲：go for it)	Strategies employed by youth for efficient resource use, pragmatic socialization, and goal achievement
5	Codes of Consumption and Fashion	*Duoba'an Chuanda* (多巴胺穿搭：dopamine dressing, a style that uses colorful clothing to boost mood), *Zhuliren* (主理人：proprietor/ creative director/founder-curator), *Zhongcao/Bacao* (种草/拔草：to seed/unseed interest), *Wanghong Tandian* (网红探店：influencer store review)	Emotional consumption, personalized expression, and the trend of brand personification
6	The Double-Edged Sword of Technology	*Shuzhihua* (数智化：digital and intelligent transformation), *Zhineng Xiangshan* (智能向善：AI for good), *Dashuju Shashu* (大数据杀熟：big data price discrimination)	Achievements in technological development and the ensuing social-ethical debates
7	The New Silver Wave	*Yinfa Jingji* (银发经济：silver-haired economy), *Yinfa Liliang* (银发力量：silver-haired power), *Shilaohua* (适老化：age-friendly adaptation), *Baotuan Yanglao* (抱团养老：group elderly care)	New opportunities under population aging and the new image of the elderly demographic

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Session	Theme	Core Vocabulary Examples	Social Observation Focus
8	Carnival of the Grassroots	*Cunchao* (村超：Village Super League), *Xiaohaige/Xiaohaojie* (小孩哥/小孩姐：A respectful term for children who are wise beyond their years in certain areas), *Gaoshou Zaiminjian* (高手在民间：True masters walk among the common people/Exceptional talent often hides in plain sight.)	Vitality at the grassroots level, cultural confidence, and the breakout of grassroots culture
9	Comprehensive Application: Scenario Simulation Workshop	Comprehensive application of vocabulary from previous sessions	Enhancing comprehensive language use and communicative strategies in simulated real-life scenarios
10	Final Project Presentation & Future Trends	Student group reports and defense	Integrating learning outcomes, discussing the lifecycle of catchphrases and strategies for continuous learning

3.3 Representative Lesson Plan Demonstration: Session 2 "A Guide to Workplace Survival"

The following uses Session 2 as an example to illustrate how the "Word-Meme-Context" trinity pedagogy is implemented in classroom practice.

A. Teaching Objectives:

To comprehend and use terms like *Banwei*, *Moyu*, *Neijuan*, and *Tangping* to describe workplace phenomena.

To explain the Chinese workplace culture and social mentality reflected by these terms.

To preliminarily use these terms in simulated office conversations.

B. Teaching Materials:

Videos: Short skits about *Banwei*; news reports on "Why are young people keen on *Moyu*?"

Images: Comparative diagrams illustrating *Neijuan* vs. *Tangping*.

Texts: Screenshots of social media discussions about "Workplace PUA".

C. Teaching Procedure:

Lead-in (10 minutes): Play a short video about *Banwei* and ask students, "Why does the person in the video look so tired?" to introduce the theme.

Presentation and Exploration (35 minutes): Explain core vocabulary using the "Word-Meme-Context" method, as below:

Word: Explain the meaning and usage of *Banwei* (noun, the feature of office workers) and *Moyu* (verb, to slack off).

Meme: Explain that *Neijuan* originates from anthropology, now referring to irrational internal competition; *Tangping* stems from "lying flatism", a form of passive resistance. Analyze the cultural stories behind them.

Context: Present specific contexts. E.g., "Monday morning, the *Banwei* on me is hard to hide." (state); "I was too sleepy in the afternoon, *Moyu* for a bit on my phone." (action); "This project is too *Neijuan*, I choose to *Tangping*." (attitude). Guide students to discuss whether these phenomena exist in their cultures and any differences.

Practice (20 minutes): Group activity. Provide scenario cards (e.g., being invited by a friend while working overtime, seeing a colleague slacking off, facing an impossible task). Students role-play, attempting to use the new vocabulary in dialogues.

Production and Summary (25 minutes):

Production: Groups perform their situational dialogues. The teacher and other groups provide feedback.

Summary: The teacher summarizes the lesson's vocabulary and guides students to think deeper: "Are *Neijuan* and *Tangping* the only ways out? What contradictory psychology does this reflect among young people?" (Connecting to the Social Observation Focus).

This lesson plan fully demonstrates how a social theme (workplace) serves as a container for integrating related catchphrases (Word) by parsing their cultural connotations (Meme) and situational applications (Context), ultimately achieving the simultaneous enhancement of language skills and cultural insight.

4. Pedagogical Discussion and Reflection

This course design, which systematically introduces internet catchphrases into international Chinese teaching, represents an attempt to bridge the gap between textbook language and the living language of society. Any pedagogical innovation must undergo practical testing and critical reflection, which this section will now undertake.

4.1 The Core Value of the Course

The value of this course manifests at three levels, transcending mere vocabulary instruction:

Enhancing Communicative Authenticity and Cultural Affinity: Learners trained through traditional methods can sometimes engage in grammatically correct but rigid and distant conversations. This course enables learners to understand and participate in the vibrant daily exchanges among their Chinese peers, colleagues, or online friends, significantly reducing the psychological distance in communication. Mastering terms like *Banwei* or *Moyu* is not just language acquisition; it is a

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temporary co-construction of group identity that can quickly shorten the social distance between interlocutors.

Fostering Deep Cultural Insight and Social Empathy: The core objective of the course is not to have learners memorize word lists, but to guide them to become active "social decoders." By exploring the structural pressures behind *Neijuan* or the collective anxiety to which *Songchigan* responds, learners move beyond superficial curiosity to the core of contemporary Chinese social sentiment, understanding the causes and effects behind specific phenomena, thereby developing a profound capacity for cultural empathy.

Stimulating and Sustaining Advanced Learning Motivation: Intermediate-advanced learners can sometimes hit a motivation plateau. The novel, engaging, and highly relevant content provided by this course can effectively rekindle learning enthusiasm. When students find they can decipher a Weibo hot search topic, understand the "meme" in a popular short video, or no longer get stuck by catchphrases when communicating with native speakers, the sense of achievement is significant, creating a positive learning cycle.

4.2 Challenges and Countermeasures

In implementing this course, we anticipate several main challenges and propose corresponding strategies:

4.2.1 Challenge 1: The Timeliness of Catchphrases and Course Stability

Description: The lifecycle of internet catchphrases is short, with rapid renewal. A well-designed course risks content obsolescence as some terms fall out of fashion quickly.

Countermeasure: The fundamental aim of the course is not to provide an "expirable" vocabulary list, but to cultivate learners' "meta-ability" to understand and learn catchphrases. Teaching should specifically include components on the generative mechanisms of popular terms (e.g., phonetic borrowing, semantic shift, abbreviation) and guide learners to use tools like social media and news apps to independently track and verify new terms. The teacher should be positioned as a "collaborator" exploring alongside the learners, not the sole knowledge authority.

4.2.2 Challenge 2: The Complexity of Cultural Understanding and Potential Misinterpretation

Description: Catchphrases often carry subtle, complex, and even contradictory social sentiments (e.g., *Tangping* can signify passive resistance or temporary emotional catharsis). Learners might develop simplistic or biased understandings due to cultural differences.

Countermeasure: It is essential to strengthen the "Perspectives" dimension in teaching. Teachers should not settle for explaining meanings but should guide students to explore the social controversies and diverse viewpoints behind the terms by providing multi-angled, in-depth materials (e.g., opinion pieces, documentary clips, group debates). Encouraging cross-cultural comparison, reflecting on whether similar phenomena exist but are expressed differently in their own countries, helps foster critical thinking and complex cultural cognitive schemata.

4.2.3 Challenge 3: Higher Demands on Teacher Knowledge and Pedagogical Skill

Description: Effective implementation of this course requires teachers themselves not only to have high Chinese proficiency but also to remain immersed in Chinese internet culture, maintain sensitivity to social dynamics, and be able to transform this into teaching resources.

Countermeasure: Teachers need to adopt the self-orientation of "lifelong learners" and "cultural explorers". Establishing teacher learning communities for sharing resources (e.g., quality short videos, article links) and holding regular teaching workshops is recommended. Furthermore, teachers should skillfully leverage discoveries made by learners, constructing the classroom as a dynamic ecosystem for mutual teacher-student learning and updating.

4.3 Implications for International Chinese Textbook Compilation

The philosophy and practice of this course design offer the following implications for the compilation of more systematic international Chinese textbooks:

Incorporating Dynamic Supplementary Modules: Mainstream textbooks could add flexible sections like "Social Kaleidoscope" or "Catchphrase Watch" at the end of each unit or the book itself, introducing catchphrases related to the unit theme in an appendix format, complemented by QR codes linking to online updated resources or extended readings.

Promoting Digitalization and Modularization of Textbooks: The future form of textbooks should be more flexible. For instance, supporting digital resource platforms could be developed to regularly push short learning materials on new words and social hotspots. Teachers could freely integrate these modular contents into main textbook instruction based on teaching needs, akin to "building with LEGO bricks".

Strengthening the Design of "Authentic Tasks": Textbook exercise design should draw more from this course's task-based philosophy, reducing mechanical drills and increasing tasks based on genuine communicative needs, such as "analyzing the emotional tendency of an online comment" or "explaining the meaning of a specific 'meme' to a foreign friend".

In summary, despite the challenges, the value of systematically integrating internet catchphrases into teaching is significant. It represents an important shift for international Chinese education, moving from pure language skill instruction towards cultivating global citizens with intercultural communicative competence and an understanding of contemporary society.

5. Conclusion

This paper has addressed the core contradiction in international Chinese education between the slow update cycle of textbook content and learners' growing need for the "living language", arguing for the necessity and feasibility of systematically integrating contemporary Chinese internet catchphrases into the teaching system. As a practical response to this proposition, we have proposed a short-term course—" 'Geng' dong Zhongguo: Decoding Internet Catchphrases and Contemporary Social Sentiments"—grounded in sociocultural theory and the three-dimensional model of cultural teaching, and characterized by its core "Word-Meme-Context" trinity pedagogy.

The value of this course design lies in its shift in pedagogical perspective: it repositions online catchphrases from marginalized "informal expressions" to valuable windows for insight into the target society and culture, and effective tools for enhancing learners' communicative authenticity. Through its thematic and

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modular syllabus, the design integrates seemingly disparate vocabulary into a vivid panorama depicting the contemporary Chinese workplace mentality, aesthetics of life, tech ethics, and grassroots vitality. This enables learners to not only master linguistic forms but also to deeply interpret the underlying social sentiments and group psychology.

We fully acknowledge the significant challenges inherent in implementation, namely the timeliness of the content, the depth of cultural understanding required, and the demands placed on teachers. However, as elaborated in this paper, by elevating the teaching objective from "imparting a fixed vocabulary list" to "cultivating a dynamic ability for cultural decoding", and by employing corresponding pedagogical strategies, these challenges can be effectively managed and transformed.

Finally, the significance of this study extends beyond the design of a single course. It aims to call upon the field of international Chinese education to pay greater attention to the ongoing, vibrant socio-cultural transformations in contemporary China. Future textbook compilation, teacher development, and classroom instruction must become more dynamic and sensitive, proactively integrating the social vitality of the language and its cultural context into all aspects of teaching practice. Only by doing so can we cultivate global citizens who are not only linguistically fluent but also culturally literate, capable of genuinely integrating into and understanding contemporary Chinese society. This represents a crucial mission and developmental direction for international Chinese education in the new era.

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