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Sensory Experience, Gustatory Politics, and Spatial Aesthetics: Implications of an Intercultural Course for the Cultivation of Students' Cultural Literacy and Global Citizenship Consciousness

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Abstract:

This study investigates the pedagogical and cultural implications of the course Coffee Houses and Western Restaurants in China, which integrates taste, space, and experiential learning to cultivate students' cultural literacy. Drawing on student interviews, reflection journals, reading notes, and internship reports, the research develops the Taste–Space–Learning Framework, highlighting how sensory experiences of food and spatial design facilitate critical reflection, aesthetic participation, and creative practice. Findings reveal that taste functions not only as a sensory engagement but also as a medium for social and cultural discourse, while space serves as both a stage and substance for negotiating global and local identities. The course demonstrates the potential of interdisciplinary, experiential pedagogy to enhance intercultural competence, civic awareness, and aesthetic citizenship. Implications extend to higher education and globalized cultural studies, suggesting that embodied learning through food and space can foster holistic cultural understanding, critical thinking, and creative agency. Limitations and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Taste–Space–Learning Framework; experiential learning; cultural literacy; intercultural competence; food and space; aesthetic citizenship

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the global circulation of food, space, and cultural symbols has reshaped how people experience cities and form identities within them. In contemporary China, coffee houses and Western restaurants have become more than sites of consumption—they are now aesthetic and social spaces where middle-class lifestyles, cosmopolitan identities, and new urban citizenship are performed and negotiated. These spaces serve as cultural interfaces where global taste meets local adaptation, and where "taste" itself functions as both a sensory and sociocultural category, reflecting the intersection of globalization, modernity, and everyday life.

Despite the increasing attention to coffee culture and Western dining in Chinese urban studies and food anthropology, few pedagogical models have systematically integrated these phenomena into higher education. The course *"Coffee Houses and Western Restaurants in China—Collective Memory, Social Life, and Urban Citizenship Constructed by Taste Experience and Spatial Aesthetics"*, designed and instructed by Dr. Huang Xiao, responds to this gap by combining theoretical inquiry with practical training in culinary art, food aesthetics, and spatial design. The course is jointly offered in the Puebla Metropolitan Area, Mexico, and emphasizes both academic research and field immersion, encouraging

students to explore how food and space embody cultural meanings across national and disciplinary boundaries.

This study takes the course as a pedagogical experiment and academic case to investigate how *taste experience* and *spatial aesthetics* can become mediums of cultural learning and identity formation. It asks: How do the practices of making, tasting, and designing coffee and Western-style cuisine in China reflect collective memory and the construction of urban citizenship? How can cross-cultural, interdisciplinary teaching help students critically engage with the social life of taste and the politics of space? By situating this course within the theoretical frameworks of the sociology of taste, spatial theory, and experiential learning, the research aims to demonstrate that culinary spaces are not merely physical sites of consumption but active pedagogical spaces where culture is produced, negotiated, and embodied.

Ultimately, this paper argues that teaching through food and space offers a powerful methodology for cultivating students' cultural literacy and global citizenship. It not only bridges theory and practice but also transforms eating, tasting, and spatial design into acts of reflection and dialogue—linking individual sensory experience to collective memory and urban cultural identity in a rapidly globalizing China.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Sociology of Taste: From Distinction to Cultural Identity

The sociology of taste provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how sensory preferences and aesthetic judgments are intertwined with social hierarchies and cultural identities. Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984) posits that taste is not merely an individual preference but a manifestation of social position and cultural capital. Through acts of consumption—whether in food, fashion, or art—people perform and reproduce class distinctions. In contemporary China, the rise of coffee culture and Western dining offers a vivid example of how taste becomes a marker of urban sophistication and cosmopolitan belonging (Zhou, 2018; Wu, 2021).

Recent scholarship has extended Bourdieu's framework into the field of food studies and culinary anthropology. Researchers argue that taste serves as a "cultural language" through which individuals negotiate identity in the context of globalization (Johnston & Baumann, 2015; Probyn, 2012). Within Chinese cities, coffee houses and Western restaurants are not only spaces for tasting but also stages where consumers perform modernity and articulate middle-class aspirations (Liu, 2020). These studies suggest that "taste" is an active social process—one that constructs belonging and difference within urban cultural life.

2.2 Space, Aesthetics, and the Production of Urban Culture

Spatial theory offers another crucial perspective for analyzing the cultural significance of coffee houses and Western restaurants. Henri Lefebvre (1991) conceptualized space as socially produced rather than passively existing. He argued that every spatial form—whether a café, a park, or a shopping mall—embodies power relations, economic structures, and cultural meanings. In this sense, the spatial design of dining places in China mirrors the transformation of the urban landscape under global capitalism and aesthetic consumption (Zhang & Oakes, 2019).

Michel de Certeau (1984) further emphasized that everyday practices, such as walking, eating, and interacting in public spaces, produce "lived space." In cafés, patrons' bodily gestures, conversations, and sensory experiences constitute micro-practices that create meaning beyond architectural design. Scholars of Chinese urban culture have observed that coffee houses, in particular, serve as heterotopic spaces that mediate global and local identities (Wang, 2017; Chen, 2022). They embody what Lefebvre termed "the right to the city," where citizens construct their sense of belonging and agency through aesthetic and sensory engagement.

2.3 Experiential Learning and Cultural Pedagogy

Experiential learning theory provides a pedagogical framework for integrating taste and space into educational practice. David Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model—comprising concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation—emphasizes that meaningful learning arises from the transformation of experience. This approach has been increasingly adopted in higher education to bridge theory and practice, especially in fields such as anthropology, design, and hospitality studies (Moon, 2004; Beard & Wilson, 2013).

In the context of culinary education, experiential learning allows students to engage directly with the sensory, spatial, and cultural dimensions of food (Long, 2015). Studies in *food pedagogy* have shown that tasting, cooking, and designing spaces can foster critical awareness of culture and identity (Heldke, 2020). Moreover, cross-cultural programs—such as those between China and Mexico—enable students to encounter food as both an aesthetic practice and a social text, enhancing their cultural literacy and global citizenship (García & Chen, 2021).

Together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate the pedagogical and cultural significance of the course *"Coffee Houses and Western Restaurants in China."* By combining the sociology of taste, spatial theory, and experiential learning, the course positions food and space not only as objects of study but as active mediums through which students learn to interpret, critique, and reconstruct cultural meanings in an interconnected world.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical model that connects **taste**, **space**, and **learning** as interrelated dimensions of cultural experience and pedagogy. Drawing on insights from the sociology of taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Johnston & Baumann, 2015), spatial theory (Lefebvre, 1991; de Certeau, 1984), and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004), the framework conceptualizes coffee houses and Western restaurants in China as *pedagogical spaces*—arenas where aesthetic experience, cultural memory, and social identity are simultaneously produced and reflected upon.

3.1 Taste as Cultural and Pedagogical Experience

Taste, following Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualization, is a socially and culturally structured disposition that reflects not only individual preference but also collective habitus and class distinction. Within the context of this study, taste operates on two levels: the **sensory level**, which involves embodied experiences of flavor and texture; and the **symbolic level**, where taste signifies cultural capital and social positioning (Probyn, 2012; Liu, 2020).

However, in an educational setting, taste can also function as a *pedagogical experience*. When students learn to interpret taste as a form of cultural expression—through tasting, cooking, and menu design—they develop a reflexive awareness of how cultural identities are constructed through food (Heldke, 2020). The process of "learning through tasting" transforms an everyday sensory act into an analytical and critical engagement with society, culture, and aesthetics.

3.2 Space as Cultural Production and Learning Environment

The notion of **space** in this framework builds on Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the *production of space*, which views spatial forms as the outcomes of social relations and cultural production. Coffee houses and Western restaurants are therefore not neutral consumption venues but "produced spaces" that encode aesthetic values, economic aspirations, and global imaginaries (Zhang & Oakes, 2019).

At the same time, de Certeau's (1984) idea of "lived space" suggests that spatial meaning emerges through everyday practices—such as sitting, drinking coffee, or socializing—that continually reproduce or resist dominant social orders. Within the course, students are encouraged to read and design such spaces critically: to observe how layout, décor, and atmosphere embody cultural memory, and to reimagine spatial aesthetics that integrate Chinese and Western sensibilities. In this way, spatial

analysis becomes both an intellectual exercise and a creative act, bridging theoretical insight with material practice.

3.3 Learning as Experiential and Reflective Practice

The third component, **learning**, draws upon Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which identifies four stages—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation—as the dynamic process of knowledge formation. In the context of this course, students first *experience* coffee and Western food culture through field investigation; then *reflect* on these experiences in discussions and written reports; *conceptualize* the sociocultural meanings of taste and space; and finally *experiment* through creative projects such as menu design and business proposals.

Moon (2004) further emphasizes reflection as the bridge between experience and theory. Through guided reflection, learners move from personal sensation to analytical understanding, integrating emotion, cognition, and creativity. This framework positions the student not as a passive receiver of cultural knowledge but as an *active participant* who constructs meaning through embodied and situated learning.

3.4 Integrating Taste, Space, and Learning: A Conceptual Model

The **Taste–Space–Learning Framework** thus proposes that: **Taste** provides the sensory and affective foundation for cultural engagement; **Space** mediates the translation of sensory experience into collective and aesthetic forms; **Learning** enables the transformation of these experiences into reflective, interdisciplinary knowledge.

In combination, these dimensions create a *pedagogical ecology* that aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) concept of "the right to the city" and Kolb's (1984) model of transformative learning. Students, through embodied practice, come to understand not only how taste and space construct cultural memory but also how they themselves participate in the production of urban modernity and citizenship.

This theoretical synthesis allows the course *"Coffee Houses and Western Restaurants in China"* to serve as both a site of cultural research and a laboratory of experiential pedagogy—where the intersection of taste, space, and learning cultivates a new form of cultural literacy rooted in sensory awareness, aesthetic appreciation, and critical reflection.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design: Pedagogical Action Research

This study adopts a **pedagogical action research** design (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010), positioning the course *"Coffee Houses and Western Restaurants in China"* both as a teaching experiment and as a site for scholarly inquiry. Action research emphasizes reflective cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting—allowing educators to investigate and improve their pedagogical practices in situ (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). In this context, the instructor-researcher (Dr. Huang) assumes a dual role: as facilitator of students' experiential learning and as observer-analyst of how taste, space, and cultural understanding are constructed through course activities.

The design of this study aligns with the principles of **critical pedagogy** (Freire, 1970) and **experiential education** (Kolb, 1984). It seeks not only to document learning outcomes but also to empower students to become reflexive learners and cultural interpreters. The research process thus unfolds through cycles of curriculum delivery, reflective observation, and data analysis, enabling the continuous refinement of the teaching model.

4.2 Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted within the cross-college joint training program in the **Puebla Metropolitan Area, Mexico**, which brings together postgraduate and senior undergraduate students from disciplines including **culinary anthropology**, **hospitality management**, and **culinary space**

design. A total of 32 students (12 postgraduate and 20 undergraduate) participated in the 12-week course.

Participants were selected based on academic performance and language proficiency, ensuring they could engage critically with both English and Chinese course materials. Students were informed that their assignments and reflections might be used for research purposes, with consent forms collected in accordance with ethical research guidelines (BERA, 2018). All personal identifiers were anonymized during data presentation.

4.3 Data Sources and Collection

Data collection integrated **multiple qualitative methods** to capture the multidimensional nature of learning through taste and space:

Classroom Observations: The instructor maintained detailed field notes on class discussions, workshops, and design sessions, focusing on how students engaged with sensory experience and spatial interpretation (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Student Artifacts: Students' final *business proposals*, *menu designs*, *reading reports*, and *internship portfolios* served as key textual data for analysis. These artifacts reflect students' evolving understanding of cultural hybridity, urban aesthetics, and creative adaptation.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Follow-up interviews with 10 volunteer students explored their reflections on cultural identity, sensory learning, and interdisciplinary collaboration (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Reflective Journals: Students maintained weekly reflective logs documenting their experiential learning, emotional responses, and self-assessment during the two internship projects.

This multi-source design allowed for **methodological triangulation** (Denzin, 2017), enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through **qualitative thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved: Familiarizing with data through repeated reading of texts and field notes;
Generating initial codes around key concepts such as "taste," "space," "identity," and "reflection"; Grouping codes into higher-order themes (e.g., "embodied learning," "aesthetic citizenship," "cross-cultural creativity"); Interpreting these themes in light of the *Taste–Space–Learning* theoretical framework.

4.5 Ethical Considerations and Research Validity

The research adhered to international ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2018; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Participants were fully informed about the research purpose, data confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The dual role of the instructor as researcher required maintaining reflexivity and transparency to minimize bias (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

To ensure validity, the study employed **triangulation**, **member checking**, and **researcher reflexive journals**. Triangulation strengthened the reliability of findings by cross-verifying data from different sources. Member checking involved sharing preliminary interpretations with selected students for feedback. Reflexive journaling enabled the instructor to critically examine her assumptions and positionality within the research process.

5. Findings and Discussion

This study, based on a comprehensive analysis of student interviews, reflective journals, reading notes, classroom observation records, and internship reports, reveals the dynamic processes of learning and cultural understanding among students in the course *Coffee Houses and Western Restaurants in China*. The analysis indicates that students' learning experiences focused primarily on three thematic

areas: **Cultural Reflexivity through Taste**, **Spatial Aesthetics and Aesthetic Citizenship**, and **Cross-Cultural Learning and Creative Practice**.

These findings collectively verify the "**Taste–Space–Learning Framework**" proposed in this research: entering cultural reflection through the sensory experience of taste, perceiving social structures and aesthetic order through space, and achieving cross-cultural creativity and self-transformation through learning.

5.1 Cultural Reflexivity through Taste

5.1.1 From Physiological Sensation to Cultural Awareness

At the beginning of the course, many students—especially those from China—viewed coffee and Western cuisine as symbols of "urban modernity." They associated coffee consumption with "fashion," "refined lifestyle," and "youthfulness." However, after reading Bourdieu (1984) and Probyn (2012) and engaging in classroom discussions, they gradually realized that "taste" is a product of social structure.

A postgraduate student wrote in her reading notes:

"Bourdieu's *Distinction* helped me rethink the notion of 'taste.' I used to think I liked latte simply because of its smooth flavor, but now I realize it's actually a social label. I've been trained to become a specific kind of 'coffee consumer.'"

Another postgraduate student wrote in his notes:

"I've come to realize that taste is never 'natural'; it's shaped by society, class, and media. As Bourdieu said, 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier'—taste not only categorizes the world but also defines who we are."

An undergraduate student reflected in her journal:

"I noticed that the difference between Luckin Coffee and Starbucks is not just price—it's that they represent two different lifestyles. Starbucks stands for middle-class quiet socialization, while Luckin represents a fragmented, fast-paced urban rhythm."

Another undergraduate student shared during class discussion:

"I used to drink coffee just to stay awake, but now I think about how many 'cultural migrations' are behind this latte. The Yunnan beans, Starbucks' standardized extraction, and the consumer's self-image are all part of a taste narrative."

These reflections demonstrate that through the process of "tasting—thinking—re-tasting," students gradually developed cultural sensitivity. They began to recognize the "social dimension behind taste," what Bourdieu (1984) termed "taste as a system of dispositions."

5.1.2 Taste Experimentation and Cultural Reconstruction

During their internships, students were asked to create a "fusion beverage or dish." One team designed the **"Yunnan-Cacao Cold Brew,"** blending Yunnan Arabica coffee beans from China with Mexican cacao. In their report, they wrote:

"We wanted this drink to embody an agricultural dialogue between China and Mexico. Both cacao and coffee originate from southern highlands and are witnesses of colonial histories."

Another student wrote:

"When we made this drink, I suddenly realized that 'flavor' is also a language. We were telling a cross-cultural story through a recipe."

A student majoring in Culinary Arts created a beverage called **"Pu'er Americano."** In her description, she wrote:

"I wanted to combine the fermented aroma of Pu'er tea with the caramel bitterness of espresso to symbolize the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures—balancing bitterness and sweetness, strength and subtlety, just like our own cultural condition."

This process of turning "taste" into a "cultural metaphor" exemplifies what Probyn (2012) calls *carnal thinking*—understanding cultural complexity through bodily experience. Students ceased to be

passive receivers of taste and became *cultural blenders*, actively negotiating identity, memory, and power through taste.

All of these experiences confirm Heldke's (2020) argument that cooking and eating are *philosophical acts of embodiment*, ways of knowing both the world and the self. Students were no longer merely learning techniques; they were constructing cultural meaning through practice.

5.1.3 Taste and Memory: Awakening the Emotional Dimension

Many students connected taste with personal memory in their reflective journals. A student from Yunnan, China, wrote:

"When I drank a fruity coffee in Mexico City, it reminded me of my hometown's coffee farms. I realized that globalization isn't distant—it blooms on the tip of the tongue."

Another student wrote in her final reflection:

"What I learned wasn't recipes, but how to connect cultural memories through flavor. The bitterness and sweetness of coffee remind me of life's migration and adaptation."

These narratives illustrate the dual cognitive and emotional roles of taste in the course—it functions both as a medium of learning and a trigger of cultural memory (Probyn, 2012; Johnston & Baumann, 2015).

5.2 Spatial Aesthetics and Aesthetic Citizenship

5.2.1 Reading Space: From "Consumption Site" to "Cultural Text"

In two internship projects, students closely observed the lighting, layout, furniture, and color schemes of various dining spaces in different cities. They discovered that spatial aesthetics convey social hierarchy and cultural identity.

A student wrote in her report:

"At the 'Blue Jasmine Specialty Beverage Shop,' I noticed the wide spacing between tables and the soft lighting. The sense of 'emptiness' reminded me of the concept of *void* in Chinese gardens. I felt it was a re-creation of Chinese spatial philosophy."

Another student wrote in his journal:

"I realized for the first time that spatial arrangement is a form of 'social code.' The private rooms in upscale restaurants and the communal tables in open cafés represent different modes of social interaction."

This observation aligns with Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the *production of space*—space is not a passive container but a site of power and cultural practice.

More importantly, the field study revealed the deeper meaning of space as a medium for cultural production and identity construction. During the two internships in Puebla and Mexico City, students observed how spatial layout, decoration style, and customer interaction formed a kind of "social theater" (Lefebvre, 1991; de Certeau, 1984).

In her reflection report, one student wrote:

"When I walked into *Luyu Tea House* and saw Chinese lanterns juxtaposed with Mexican murals, I felt that the space itself was telling a cross-cultural story. The warm light created a sense of home, while the colonial architecture outside reminded me that this 'Chinese aesthetic' was actually a re-creation."

Another student annotated next to her design sketch:

"Space is an 'emotional container.' I hope my café design can let customers feel serenity visually, balance through taste, and understanding culturally."

From students' spatial analyses and creative designs, it is evident that they have grasped the *sociality of space*—viewing it not merely as a site of consumption but as a medium for cultural exchange and identity representation.

One student summarized in an interview:

"When we design a café, we're actually designing a lifestyle. A space that allows people to slow down and communicate is itself an expression of a social ideal."

This rethinking of space made students aware that, as future designers or entrepreneurs, they are not merely commercial practitioners but cultural producers and active participants in urban culture.

5.2.2 Spatial Creation: Design as Cultural Action

In the final project, students were required to submit a "business proposal" for a restaurant or café. Several teams' projects demonstrated deep understanding of the relationship between space and cultural identity.

For instance, in a proposal titled *Shanghai Meets Puebla*, the students wrote:

"We aim to create a 'public space of cultural memory,' blending architectural elements of old Shanghai houses with Puebla's colonial styles. Every wall tells a story of migration."

Another group, in their project *The Lotus & The Cactus*, explained:

"The lotus symbolizes Chinese introspection and softness, while the cactus represents Mexican resilience and exuberance. Through these two plant symbols, our spatial design narrates cross-cultural coexistence."

These projects show how students used space as a "tool of cultural narration," reflecting Zhang and Oakes' (2019) concept of *aesthetic urbanism*. Through design, they practiced *aesthetic citizenship*—active engagement with cultural diversity and public aesthetics.

5.2.3 Experiencing Space: Sociality and Emotional Connection

In interviews, many students said their understanding of "space" had shifted from the visual to the social dimension. One student remarked:

"I realized that the arrangement of tables and chairs in a café determines social distance. Space actually shapes how people interact."

Another student added:

"When we redesign a space, we're also reflecting on what kind of city we want to live in. That's a kind of social responsibility."

These perspectives reveal that students developed a sense of "citizenship" through their learning—what Lefebvre (1991) described as the *right to the city*: the right to shape public life through aesthetic and spatial participation.

5.3 Cross-Cultural Learning and Creative Practice

5.3.1 "Cultural Shock" in Field Learning

When Chinese students entered the context of Mexican culinary culture and interacted with local chefs, baristas, and customers, their learning moved from theoretical reflection to lived cross-cultural practice.

A Chinese student wrote in her internship journal:

"When I first worked with a Mexican chef to make a 'fusion dumpling with mole sauce,' I realized that the idea of 'authenticity' is relative. In that moment, we were co-creating a new flavor language."

Another Chinese student wrote:

"While working in the Chinese restaurant 'Fusion,' I noticed that local customers liked to add chili to sweet-and-sour pork. At first, I thought that wasn't 'authentic,' but later I realized authenticity is always formed through migration."

Another student shared in an interview:

"Mexicans' passion for food deeply moved me. Every time they talked about food, it was like telling a story. It made me rethink whether Chinese food culture has become too utilitarian."

These cross-cultural experiences exemplify Kolb's (1984) *experiential learning cycle*: students engaged in concrete experience and cultural comparison, reflected critically, abstracted new conceptual insights, and then applied them through active experimentation to create innovative works.

5.3.2 Creative Practice and Self-Transformation

Many students underwent a transformation "from imitation to creation" during the course. A Chinese postgraduate student wrote in her final report:

"Before this course, I kept replicating 'Western aesthetics.' Now I've learned to draw inspiration from my own culture and let my works tell their own stories. Collaborating with the Mexican team helped me understand what 'two-way cultural flow' really means."

A Mexican student remarked in an interview:

"Before, when I made desserts, I only cared about taste. Now I think about what story the dessert tells—what cultural emotion it represents."

This creative transformation exemplifies Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientização*—the awakening of cultural subjectivity through action and reflection. Students came to understand their own position within cultural structures and expressed it creatively.

Furthermore, in their reading notes, many students cited Moon's (2004) idea that "Reflection bridges the gap between experience and theory." In their reflective journals, they connected "taste," "space," and "sociality," demonstrating deep learning transfer. One student wrote:

"Space is not just decoration—it's a framework of memory; taste is not just flavor—it's the language of culture."

5.3.3 Cross-Cultural Teamwork and Learning Community

Students also experienced "collaborative learning" through multicultural teamwork. A Mexican student shared in an interview:

"I learned a kind of 'aesthetic restraint' from my Chinese peers. Their designs always contain a sense of spatial balance and poetic blankness—it made me rethink the exuberance of Latin aesthetics."

A Chinese student responded:

"We also learned from their bold use of color and vitality. The most valuable part of collaboration wasn't the final product but the process of mutual learning."

This interaction again reflects Moon's (2004) notion of the *reflective learning community*, where new knowledge and modes of perception emerge through intercultural dialogue.

By the end of the course, most students' business proposals demonstrated strong interdisciplinary integration—they combined menus, budgets, and spatial design with cultural narratives and social meaning. For example, one group's proposal, titled *Echo Café: Awakening Memory through Taste*, stated:

"We want customers to taste the flavor of home in every cup of coffee and feel a sense of belonging in the space. Coffee is merely the medium; emotion is the core."

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1 Reaffirming the Taste–Space–Learning Framework

This study explored how the course *Coffee Houses and Western Restaurants in China* enabled students to experience cultural reflection, aesthetic participation, and creative practice through taste and spatial design. The analysis of student interviews, reflection journals, reading notes, and internship reports confirms the validity of the **Taste–Space–Learning Framework** proposed in this research.

Taste, as the point of entry, functioned not merely as a sensory or culinary phenomenon but as a **social discourse** that embodies cultural memory and power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1984; Probyn, 2012). Space, in turn, emerged as both the **stage and substance of cultural negotiation**, echoing Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the social production of space and Zhang and Oakes' (2019) notion of aesthetic urbanism. Learning, finally, served as a **transformative process** through which students integrated theoretical knowledge, embodied experience, and intercultural collaboration into a dynamic praxis (Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004).

Through this triadic framework, the course cultivated a unique form of "embodied cultural literacy" (Heldke, 2020), allowing students to perceive and practice culture not as abstract theory but as lived, sensorial, and creative experience.

6.2 Educational Implications: Rethinking Cultural Pedagogy

The findings demonstrate that **food and space** can be powerful pedagogical tools for higher education. Traditional cultural studies courses often rely on textual analysis, but this course exemplifies how **experiential and sensory learning** can deepen critical engagement and foster affective understanding (Beard & Wilson, 2013; Long, 2015).

By integrating **tasting sessions, fieldwork, and design projects**, the course bridged the gap between theory and lived experience. Students' reflective journals revealed that tasting coffee or designing a restaurant space became moments of self-discovery and critical reflection. As one student wrote, *"Every time I taste something new, I also taste a piece of history."* This pedagogical approach resonates with Freire's (1970) call for *praxis*—learning that transforms consciousness through reflection and action.

From an educational standpoint, this study suggests that **interdisciplinary experiential pedagogy**—combining cultural theory, aesthetic design, and business practice—can cultivate students' cultural empathy, critical awareness, and creative agency. Such pedagogy transcends disciplinary boundaries, offering a model for **holistic learning** that unites mind, body, and emotion (Moon, 2004).

6.3 Cultural Implications: Food and Space as Sites of Identity and Belonging

This research also sheds light on the cultural dimension of globalization in contemporary China. The transformation of coffee houses and Western restaurants from symbols of elite modernity into **spaces of cultural hybridity** reflects ongoing negotiations between global and local identities (Johnston & Baumann, 2015; Wang, 2017). Students' recognition of taste and space as "cultural languages" reveals how globalization is experienced sensorially and emotionally—not only economically or politically.

Through creative projects such as *Pu'er Americano* and *The Lotus & The Cactus*, students engaged in acts of **cultural translation**, illustrating how food and space can articulate new hybrid identities. These projects exemplify what Hannerz (1992) describes as "creolization"—the blending and reconfiguration of cultural meanings in transcultural contexts.

Moreover, students' spatial analyses of cafes and restaurants reveal how aesthetic experience can foster a sense of **aesthetic citizenship** (Zhang & Oakes, 2019). When students reimagined urban dining spaces as sites of dialogue and community, they enacted Lefebvre's (1991) idea of "the right to the city." Thus, the course demonstrates how **aesthetic and sensory education** can nurture civic consciousness and participatory cultural citizenship.

6.4 Implications for Intercultural Learning and Global Education

The cross-cultural collaboration between Chinese and Mexican students provided an authentic setting for **intercultural experiential learning**. Students not only learned about cultural difference but *through* difference—developing what Deardorff (2006) calls "intercultural competence."

The *fusion dumpling with mole sauce* and other creative experiments symbolize more than culinary innovation—they represent **epistemological encounters**, where learners negotiate meaning across languages, histories, and aesthetics. Such collaboration embodies Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle: students moved from concrete experience to reflective observation, from conceptualization to experimentation, ultimately generating new cultural insights and self-awareness.

This model holds important implications for global higher education. As universities seek to internationalize curricula, this course demonstrates that **intercultural learning need not depend solely on mobility**; it can be cultivated through **embodied, sensory, and collaborative experiences**

within local contexts. Food and space, as universal yet culturally specific media, offer fertile grounds for such pedagogical innovation.

6.5 Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, it has several limitations. First, the sample size was limited to students enrolled in one course; future research could include longitudinal studies to examine how these experiences influence students' professional or cultural identities over time. Second, although the course successfully integrated experiential learning, further inquiry could explore how **digital or virtual spaces** might extend this pedagogy in online or hybrid learning environments.

Finally, more comparative studies across cultural contexts—such as between Asian, Latin American, and European settings—could deepen our understanding of how **taste and space mediate global cultural flows** and local identities.

6.6 Concluding Reflections: Learning to Taste, Space, and Be

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that learning through taste and space transforms not only what students know but **how they know**. The course *Coffee Houses and Western Restaurants in China* transcended the boundaries of culinary education, functioning as a **laboratory of cultural imagination**. Through tasting, designing, and reflecting, students became "aesthetic citizens"—capable of reading, feeling, and reshaping the world through sensory and cultural understanding.

As one student wrote in her final reflection:

"I came to this class to learn about coffee and food. I left understanding culture, space, and myself."

This statement encapsulates the essence of the Taste–Space–Learning Framework: to taste is to know, to design is to belong, and to learn is to become.

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