

# Food as a Cultural Interface's: Design-Led Communication and the Inheritance of Chinese Dumpling Culture

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## ABSTRACT

As a core component of Chinese cuisine, dumplings represent everyday cultural identity and collective memory. However, a traditional dumpling making techniques are becoming less relevant to everyday living among younger generations due to the stresses of fast-paced lifestyles and industrialized food production. This also has weakened cultural awareness within younger generation. Taking Chinese dumplings as a case study, this study investigates how design-driven communication tactics might promote the modern transmission of traditional food culture using dumplings as a cultural medium. Using qualitative cultural analysis and semi-structured interviews, the study evaluates the cultural values ingrained in dumpling-making techniques. In order to improve audience engagement and cultural identity, the study suggests an innovative and interactive cultural communication method that combines seal collection with storytelling based on QR codes. The study adds to larger conversations about the modern spread of Chinese culinary culture and provides fresh perspectives on sustainable methods for the transmission of intangible food heritage.

## INTRODUCTION

Food practices play a central role in the formation and transmission of cultural memory and collective identity. In many societies, traditional foods function not only as daily nourishment but also as symbolic media through which social values, ritual meanings, and emotional bonds are communicated. Within Chinese food culture, dumplings occupy a particularly prominent position. Indeed, as a representative traditional food, dumplings are closely associated with concepts of family reunion, seasonal transition, and auspicious symbolism, especially during important festivals such as the Spring Festival and the Winter Solstice. As emphasized by Zhou Xing (2013) that dumplings should be understood as a form of cultural narrative rather than merely a culinary product, reflecting core Chinese values such as "reunion" and "blessing." Similarly, Liu Kuili (2011) argues that festival foods embody culturally specific understandings of time and cosmology, making them key carriers of cultural continuity and identity.

Literature was established that traditional food traditions have been drastically changed by the fast-paced nature of modern living and the growth of industrialized food production. Across these scenarios, standardized, mass-produced alternatives are gradually replacing hand-made dumpling making, undermining transmission through generations and experiential engagement. Moreover, concerns over cultural authenticity and the disappearance of "living" heritage practices have grown in importance. Accordingly, Shi Lei (2020) pointed out that many legacy practices are still limited to documentary preservation rather than ongoing daily interaction and Wang Chen (2022) acknowledged this tension as a major obstacle in the protection of current intangible cultural assets.

Simultaneously, social media and digital platforms have created new avenues for cross-cultural connection. In which, traditional culture can be accessible, transformed, and be shared through interactive and participatory forms for younger audiences (Yang Qing, 2019). However, the majority of current study has only concentrated on media platforms and content distribution, but paying little attention to how visual communication and design techniques might actively mediate cultural meaning, participation, and identity development in traditional culinary culture. Although existing studies have explored traditional food culture from perspectives of folklore, sociology, and

media studies, relatively limited attention has been paid to how visual communication and design strategies can actively mediate cultural participation and meaning-making. In order to fill in these gaps, this study uses dumplings as its research subject and employs a visual communication and design approach to investigate modern channels for the dissemination of traditional Chinese food culture.

The significance of this study lies in both its theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it enriches discussions on intangible cultural heritage by introducing a design-led perspective that integrates cultural memory, authenticity discourse, media reconstruction theory, and food nationalism. Practically, the study provides insights into how visual communication and interactive design can support sustainable cultural transmission, particularly among younger generations. By demonstrating how traditional food culture can be reactivated through participatory and visually mediated experiences, this research offers new possibilities for the contemporary dissemination and creative reconfiguration of Chinese culinary heritage in an increasingly digital and globalized context.

### **Traditional Chinese Dumplings**

China possesses a rich culinary heritage, with diverse regional cuisines. Among these, dumplings are a central element of traditional food culture, carrying deep cultural significance and emotional resonance. In northern households, dumplings symbolize reunion, blessings, and the transmission of family traditions, especially during major festivals such as the Spring Festival. Originally created by Zhang Zhongjing, the "Medical Saint" of the late Eastern Han Dynasty, over 1,800 years ago, dumplings were intended as a remedy rather than a food item (Yi, 2020).

In the Chinese context, "traditional food" encompasses not only culinary techniques but also regional culture, family memory, and festival rituals (Wu & Cheung, 2002). Traditional foods often serve as expressions of national identity and historical consciousness (Lu & Fine, 1995). Dumplings exemplify this dual role, reflecting both Chinese culinary expertise in ingredient selection, craftsmanship, and flavor pairing, and the emotional ties between family and society.

Regional variation is evident in dumpling form, fillings, and preparation. Northern dumplings often contain pork and green onion, emphasizing thin wrappers and generous fillings, whereas southern varieties frequently incorporate shrimp, mushrooms, eggs, and leeks, reflecting local tastes. Cooking methods are including boiling, steaming, and frying which further diversify their texture and flavor.

Traditional foods can also function as rural tourism resources, strengthening local identity and promoting economic development (Bessière, 1998). However, contemporary society faces the challenge of balancing cultural preservation with modernization. Stimulating interest in dumpling culture among younger generations through new media, design innovation, and interactive experiences remains a critical area for exploration.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate the cultural meanings embedded in dumpling-making practices in the modern context. Semi-structured interviews and qualitative cultural analysis are employed to examine how dumpling culture is communicated and reinterpreted in the modern society. To achieve the research aim, data's were collected through textual analysis, visual content analysis, and in-depth interviews, allowing for a multidimensional interpretation of dumplings as a cultural communication medium.

For the textual analysis, a number of related literatures including journal and books been retrieved from online sources and further be reviewed comprehensively. Then for a visual content analysis, three video samples with high interaction rates were selected from mainstream social media platforms. These samples were analyzed in terms of content format, communication strategies, and mechanisms of cultural participation, with particular attention to how visual and interactive elements mediate cultural meaning. In addition to the textual analysis and content analysis, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from different regions, backgrounds, and roles related to dumpling culture, ensuring diversity and representativeness of cultural perspectives. The interview data were transcribed and thematically analyzed, and the results are presented in the

subsequent sections.

## Data Collections

### A Visual Content Selection and Analysis

For the visual content analysis, this study adopts a purposive sampling strategy to select representative social media videos related to dumpling culture. Two video samples with high interaction rates were chosen from mainstream Chinese social media platforms, as they demonstrate strong audience engagement and clear narrative structures.

The first sample is a video published by the RED platform blogger “Doubao Food Collection,” whose content emphasizes everyday cooking practices and lifestyle-oriented food narratives (Figure 1). The second sample is a video released by “Uncle Xia’s Kitchen,” a creator known for presenting traditional cooking techniques and family-oriented culinary storytelling (Figure 2).

These two cases were selected to reflect different modes of visual communication: one foregrounding contemporary lifestyle aesthetics and the other emphasizing traditional craftsmanship and cultural continuity.

The selected videos were analyzed using qualitative visual content analysis, focusing on narrative structure, visual language, modes of interaction, and strategies for constructing cultural participation.

Particular attention was paid to how dumpling-making is visually framed, how cultural meanings such as family, tradition, and authenticity are communicated, and how viewers are encouraged to engage emotionally or interactively with the content.



Figure 1: A Screenshot of Interface for Doubao Food Collection

Retrieved from: <http://xhslink.com/m/3hSDivkQLx0>



Figure 2: A Screenshot of interface for Uncle Xia’s Kitchen

Retrieved from: <https://v.douyin.com/Abh0U-XdjrY/k@c.NJ xFu:/ 01/05>

The video from RED platform content form that integrates family culture with a food tutorial. Through the combination of a clear digital title, high-quality image with text composition, and friendly tone, the content aligns closely with users’ consumption habits on the platform. The narrative adopts a sequential, tutorial-oriented structure, using the Spring Festival as a cultural backdrop while presenting a specific dumpling filling recipe. Practical cooking guidance is foregrounded, while cultural imagery such as family reunion and festive atmosphere is embedded implicitly within the narrative.

In terms of media presentation, the content is lightweight and visually refined, emphasizing ease of operation and everyday liveliness. This approach enhances platform adaptability and facilitates social circulation. Although the video does not explicitly reference the concept of “intangible cultural heritage,” it conveys strong elements of traditional Chinese family culture through food-based storytelling. By integrating practicality, emotional resonance, and cultural symbolism, the content demonstrates effective cultural communication within RED’s food-oriented media environment.

Regarding communication strategy and the construction of cultural participation, the video adopts a practical tutorial and emotional narrative approach. It strategically leverages festival timing and user psychology to increase attractiveness and shareability. Furthermore, clear recipes, consistent visual style, and a conversational tone enhance usability and engagement.

At the cultural level, the video facilitates the implicit transmission of traditional skills through everyday dietary practices. Dumplings are recontextualized from ritual food to shareable lifestyle content, bringing traditional culture closer to contemporary daily life. By encouraging user participation and reinterpretation, the content fosters a participatory and co-creative cultural atmosphere. Through situational storytelling that activates festival memories and concise visual language, the video lowers the threshold for engaging with traditional food culture and supports its continued relevance in modern media contexts.

The video published by “**Uncle Xia’s Kitchen**” on the other hand represents a contrasting mode of food-related visual communication that emphasizes traditional craftsmanship and cultural continuity. Unlike the lifestyle-oriented presentation on RED platform, this content adopts a more documentary-style narrative, focusing on the process of dumpling-making as a skilled, time-intensive practice. The visual structure is linear and process-driven, guiding viewers step by step through preparation, filling, wrapping, and cooking. The pace is relatively slow, allowing attention to be directed toward manual techniques and material details, thereby foregrounding the embodied knowledge involved in traditional cooking.

In terms of media presentation, the video employs a relatively restrained visual style, with minimal decorative elements and a strong emphasis on authenticity. Close-up shots of hand movements, ingredients, and cooking tools highlight the tactile and sensory dimensions of dumpling-making. The language used is calm and instructional, reinforcing an atmosphere of seriousness and respect toward traditional culinary knowledge. This approach enhances the perceived credibility of the content and constructs dumpling-making as a cultural skill rather than merely a convenient household activity.

Regarding communication strategy and cultural participation, the video relies on process demonstration and experiential immersion as its core strategy. Instead of explicitly encouraging interaction through platform mechanisms, it invites viewers to participate through observation, learning, and imitation. Audience engagement is generated through appreciation of craftsmanship and emotional identification with tradition, rather than through overt calls for comments or sharing. This form of participation is quieter but deeper, appealing to viewers’ desire for authenticity and cultural depth.

At the cultural level, the video frames dumpling-making as a form of living heritage embedded in everyday labor and intergenerational transmission. By emphasizing manual skill, time investment, and repetition, the content resists the logic of speed and efficiency characteristic of industrialized food culture. Dumplings are presented not only as food, but as a medium through which values such as patience, family continuity, and respect for tradition are communicated. In this way, the video constructs a cultural space where tradition is preserved through practice rather than symbolic representation.

A comparative analysis of the two video samples reveals distinct yet complementary visual communication strategies for the dissemination of dumpling culture in contemporary media environments. The RED blogger “**Doubao Food Collection**” adopts a lifestyle-oriented, emotionally driven approach that integrates practical tutorials with festive narratives, effectively aligning traditional food culture with modern platform aesthetics and user habits. In contrast, “**Uncle Xia’s Kitchen**” emphasizes authenticity, craftsmanship, and process-oriented storytelling, positioning dumpling-making as a form of cultural skill and embodied knowledge. From a communication strategy perspective, Video 1 prioritizes accessibility, platform adaptability, and social circulation by leveraging festival timing, interactive mechanisms, and UGC-driven retransmission. Video 2, however, foregrounds immersion and experiential learning, encouraging cultural participation through observation and imitation rather than explicit interaction. While the former lowers the threshold for participation, the latter deepens cultural understanding and appreciation.

At the cultural level, the two videos demonstrate different modes of cultural inheritance. Video Sample 1 transforms dumplings from ritual food into shareable lifestyle content, embedding tradition within everyday digital practices. Video Sample 2 maintains the ritual and procedural gravity of dumpling-making, reinforcing its status as living heritage rooted in manual labor and continuity. Together, these cases illustrate how traditional food culture can be transmitted through both light, participatory media forms and depth-oriented, authenticity-driven representations. This comparison suggests that sustainable dissemination of traditional food culture may benefit from a hybrid communication model that combines the accessibility and participatory potential of lifestyle media with the cultural depth and credibility of craftsmanship-focused narratives. Such an approach highlights the role of visual communication design in mediating between tradition and modernity, offering diverse pathways for engaging contemporary audiences with intangible culinary heritage.

### **A Semi-Structured Interview**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three participants representing different perspectives: an

international student (Participant 1), a local student (Participant 2), and a food blogger (Participant 3). Interviews also focused on how emotional associations with dumplings, consumption habits, social media interactions, and perceptions of cultural identity. Data were analyzed thematically and established 3 patterns which are emotional, social, and cultural engagement.

### Emotional and Cultural Connection

Participants described strong emotional connections to dumplings, particularly linked to childhood memories and family gatherings. Participant 1 emphasized the role of handmade preparation in evoking nostalgia and participation, while Participant 2 noted warm associations without a direct family tradition. Handmade dumplings were consistently seen as embodying “home taste,” whereas convenience foods were valued primarily for efficiency.

### Consumption Habits

Consumption practices varied by cultural and situational context. International students often prepare dumplings themselves to maintain cultural ties abroad. In contrast, local students generally rely on cafeterias or store-bought options, prioritizing convenience over ritual participation.

### Social Media Influence

All participants reported following dumpling-related content on platforms such as RED and Douyin. Social media content facilitated practical learning (techniques, fillings, and preparation), heightened awareness of freshness and quality, and subtly reinforced cultural understanding. Aesthetic and festival-timed posts were particularly influential in engaging audiences, even when cultural explanations were limited.

### Food Blogger Perspective

The food blogger emphasized tutorial-style and visually appealing content to maximize audience engagement. Interestingly, audience responses revealed that even content without explicit cultural context could trigger personal cultural resonance and identity reinforcement. The interview findings suggest that cultural participation in food is primarily driven by emotional memory and personal context. Social media operates as both a practical and educational tool, enabling users to engage with tradition through visual storytelling, festival timing, and aesthetic presentation. Despite this, interactivity between creators and consumers remains limited, indicating opportunities for more participatory engagement strategies. Based on the data analysis, the study was proposed a design. The detail of it explain in the next following section.

### The Design Process

#### Phase 1: Selection of Traditional Chinese Dumplings

The goal of this phase is to identify representative traditional Chinese dumplings that will be used for interactive experiences. The selection criteria include: regional representativeness, diversity of shapes, cultural significance and folk value. The final selection includes: northern boiled dumplings (representing northern festival food) and southern fried dumplings (reflecting regional differences). These dumplings are not only an important part of the daily life of Chinese families, but also carry festive traditions and human touch.

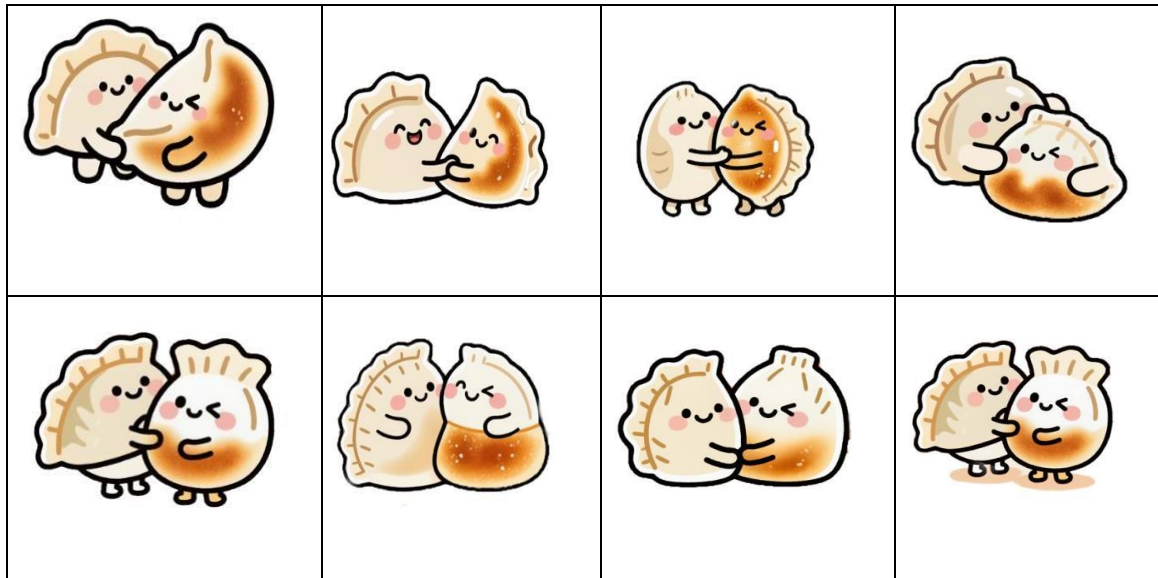
**Table 2** Example of Traditional Chinese Dumplings

Types	Northern dumplings (Festival Representative)	Southern fried dumplings (Regional Differences)
Characteristics	Boiled dumplings Thin skin and rich fillings, various types (meat, vegetables, mixed)	Oil-fried dumplings, Crispy outside and tender inside Dipping sauce

<b>Regions</b>	Mainly in Northern China Widely consumed during festivals	Mainly in Southern China Fried flavors
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### Phase 2: Dumpling Graphic Design

This phase focused on transforming the image of traditional dumplings into easily recognizable graphic elements. The design uses bright and warm colors, combined with anthropomorphism and hand-drawn illustration styles to enhance intimacy and fun. Figure 3 show the example of the design.



**Figure 3:** Example of the Dumplings Design

### Phase 3: QR Code

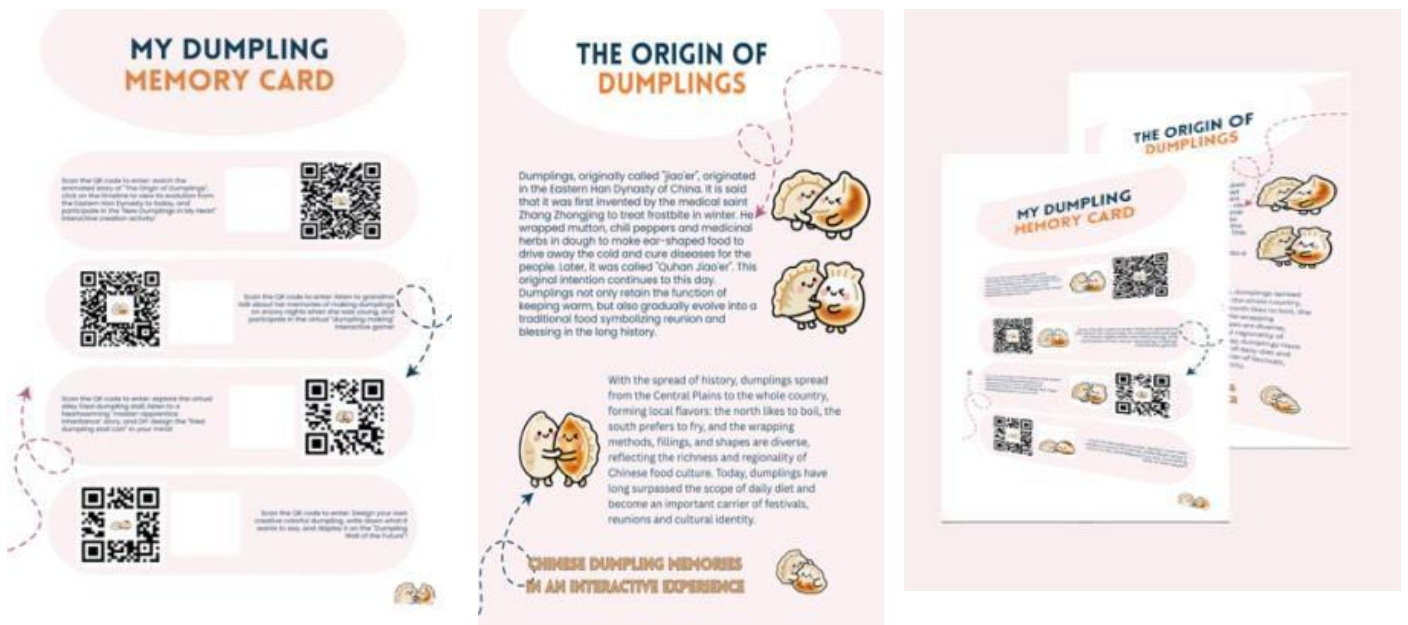
Each dumpling image was embedded with a unique QR code, and viewers can scan the QR codes to watch a short video of the dumpling-making process, listen to the stories about dumplings told by the older generation, or check their cultural background and evolution. This aim to build a deeper cultural understanding through interaction. The example of QR codes shown as Figure 4.



**Figure 4:** Example of QR Codes

### Phase 4: Interactive Experience Electronic Poster Design

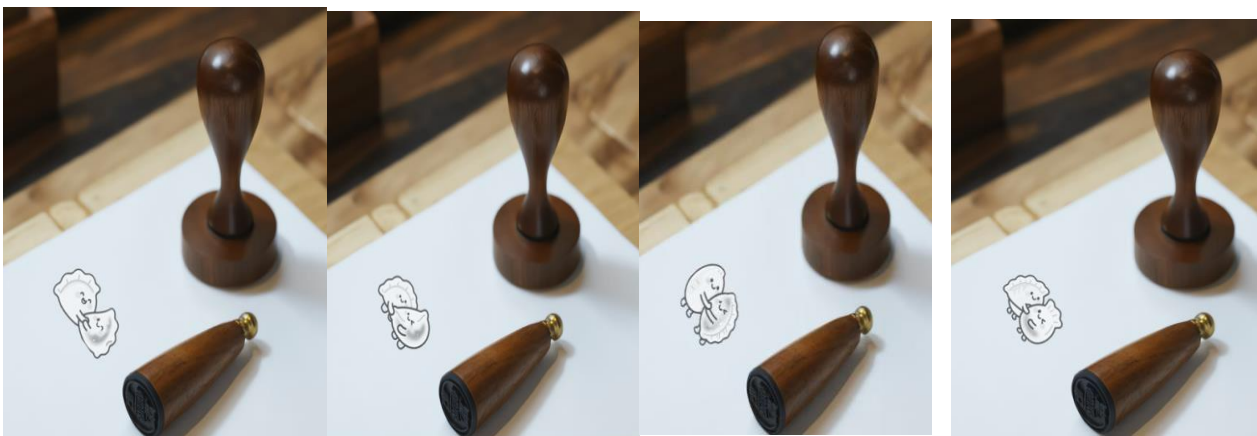
As the main carrier of the "Interactive Experience Tour", the electronic poster is designed in combination with the code scanning interactive mechanism. The electronic poster contains a stampable (electronic seal) area and a QR code location. After participants scan different QR codes, they can collect customized electronic seals to form an electronic version of "My Dumpling Memory Card Book". Each card is also used as a cultural education tool, with an introduction to the origin of dumplings and interactive prompts on the back to enhance the fun and knowledge.



**Figure 5:** Interactive Experience Electronic Poster Design

### Phase 5: The Final Product

The final product integrates all design elements - including interactive seals, electronic posters, QR code stories and visual manuals - into a coherent, interesting and easy-to-engage experience process. This phase focuses on the integration of visual consistency, user guidance and cultural narrative to ensure that the memory of traditional Chinese dumplings can be conveyed to users of different ages in an interactive way, especially the younger generation.



**Figure 6:** The Example of the Final Look of Seal pattern

In order to evaluate the actual effect of this project in cultural communication and educational guidance, we plan to cooperate with local Chinese cultural centers, community festivals, and junior high schools to conduct a small-scale pilot study. The pilot will invite users to complete the full process of "seal collection + code scanning and listening + dumpling making" and provide feedback on their usage experience, cultural resonance and immersion. The collected opinions will help further optimize the content presentation and interactive process, clarify the communication effect, and provide data support and strategic guidance for the promotion of the project in a wider area.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the "Chinese Dumpling Memories" project aims to protect and pass on the traditional Chinese dumpling culture in an innovative and interactive way. The project presents the historical evolution, cultural

symbols and diverse forms of dumplings into a vivid and immersive experience process by combining seal collection, QR code storytelling and electronic poster display. Participants can not only understand the cultural background of different types of dumplings such as northern dumplings, southern fried dumplings and Hakka abacus dumplings, but also deepen their understanding of the richness of Chinese food culture through interaction.

The project places special emphasis on intergenerational inheritance and multi-sensory participation, making dumplings not only a kind of food, but also a cultural memory that can be perceived and told. Through the integration of visual design and digital technology, this experience form also adapts to the new generation's acceptance of traditional culture, making the dissemination of traditional food culture more attractive and participatory.

In order to enhance the influence and social value of the project, the team is actively exploring the possibility of cooperation with local Chinese cultural associations, schools and museums, trying to integrate interactive dumpling experiences into educational projects and cultural exhibitions, so as to achieve long-term dissemination and the establishment of cultural identity. In the future, this project is expected to become a new model for promoting traditional food culture, stimulate the public, especially the younger generation's interest in and recognition of intangible cultural heritage, and promote the continued dissemination and innovative interpretation of China's traditional festival food culture.

### Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the paper's publication.

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