

The Desirability of Integrating Chinese Culture into College English Teaching: A Case Study*

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A brief review of the history shows that China's educational pendulum has always swung between English as an important practical tool for China to connect with the world and English as a threat to Chinese language and culture. In recent years, China sees a rising concern over the declining of *Guoxue*, or the study of traditional Chinese culture, and the absence of Chinese culture in College English pedagogy. A survey conducted in South China University of Technology shows that even for non-English majors with good English competency, their ability to express local cultures in English is weak. However, despite some experts' calling for reducing the proportion of English in education, this paper holds that English should be restored to its place as a *lingua franca* and that the reform of College English education is urgent and desirable. The integration of Chinese culture into College English can be achieved by such ways as re-editing the "Syllabus", renewing textbooks, improving teachers' competency, and revising the assessment methodologies.

Keywords: the absence of *Guoxue* in English teaching, College English, intercultural communicative competence

Early in 2004, the Education Ministry of China has promulgated the new "College English Curriculum Requirements", requiring that non-English majors "should be able to translate articles about Chinese conditions and Chinese culture", and in 2013, College English Test Band 4 or 6 (CET4 or CET6 for short), the most popular exam for the non-English majors in China, also added Chinese culture in the translation module. Behind these reforms is the absence of traditional Chinese culture in College English teaching, which, as some argue, have led to some terrible consequences, like, Chinese students cannot share with their foreign friends their own cultures, or more seriously, as Professor Cong Cong (2000) has maintained, Chinese students fail to reveal an independent cultural identity.

The following survey explores students' ability to convey Chinese cultures and their willingness to learn Chinese culture in English, which aims to see whether Chinese culture should be involved in College English pedagogy and how to make it come true. Considering that the English competency of the non-English majors is a far cry from each other, this research narrowed the scope of the respondents down to those non-English

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majors who are of excellent English communicative skills, and aims to see whether these students can have a better result in conveying Chinese culture in English.

English as a Threat to Local Language and Culture in China

Before jumping to the analysis of the survey, it is necessary to draw a brief review about what role English has played in Chinese history. Indeed, up to the mid-19th century, English, among other foreign languages, was regarded as barbarian or inferior to Chinese. China was forced to “open her eyes” after the Opium War (1839-1842) and the subsequent Westernization Movement formally set up English courses for the first time. But as one of the most famous slogans in this period “Chinese culture is for essential importance while western culture is for practical purposes” (*Zhong Xue Wei Ti, Xi Xue Wei Yong*) has revealed, English during this period was skill-based and marginal.

During the late Qing Dynasty and after its collapse, the attitudes towards foreign language has basically been fluctuating. At the beginning of the 20th century, the mission schools with English courses flourished (Ross, 1993, p. 30), but later, as educational policy became more controlled by the government to unify China, English was criticized as a source of cultural and psychological disunity (Tsang, 1933, p. 71, quoted in Ross, 1993, p. 34). After World War II, English-learning in both mission schools and public-sponsored institutions enjoyed a revival (Ross, 1993, p. 35), but with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, due partly to the heavy reliance of Soviet assistance, Russian replaced English as the preferred foreign language while English, instead, was regarded as vestiges of cultural and economic imperialism, which resulted in the disbanding of missionary institutions or their increasing cooperation with government-funded schools. Although English witnessed a temporal revival in early 1960s with the changing international situation and the global vision of some leaders, it was soon undermined again during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when the whole modern education system was dismantled in hopes of building a brand-new educational institution suited to the socialist system (Hayhoe, 1989, p. 49).

It was not until the 1970s, with the initiation of “Four Modernization” and the policy of reform and opening-up, English started to gain popularity. Although in the early 1980s, there was also concerns over the fact that foreign-language-learning could easily result in “spiritual pollution”, English was gradually perceived as a necessity for college entrance, employment, job promotion and training abroad, and its importance continued to grow. The commitment to learning English further intensified in the following decades. In 1993, the Education Ministry of China officially confirmed the English syllabus for the new secondary school curriculum and in 2003, it announced a new “student-centered” English language curriculum for all primary and secondary schools, despite the fact that, early in the 1990s, many schools in the cities have made English one of the three key subjects for the primary students, the other two being Chinese and Mathematics.

Among this craze for English learning, there has always been concerns over its threat to traditional Chinese language and culture, because people found that most teaching materials for both English majors and non-English majors are about Anglophone cultural products. As Qu (2012, p. 17) said, among 118 books recommended to the English majors on the reading list, 106 are related to Anglophone cultures. And since most English teachers are from the English majors, their teaching would also emphasize the Anglophone cultures, because “the ‘standard English’ of Britain and the ‘general American’ of the United States” was upheld as the

“primary target model of English” (Bolton, 2006, p. 2). This so-called “native speaker model” impels the learners’ preference over the native speaker image, and, together with the dominance of western culture in the past century in the world stage, leads to the popularity of the English-language cultures, like films, TV programs, newspapers and books etc.

The one-way distribution of Anglophone cultural products has raised concerns over the “aphasia” of Chinese language and culture in English teaching. “Aphasia” was a medical term, according to the Webster dictionary, it means “loss or impairment of the power to use or comprehend words usually resulting from brain damage (as from a stroke, head injury, or infection)”. In 2000, Cong Cong firstly applied this term to the absence of Chinese culture in English teaching, referring to it as “the aphasia of Chinese culture in English”. Although discussion concerning the marginal place of Chinese culture in English teaching has started in 1990s (Liu, 1995, p. 73), it was not until recent years, probably with the implementation of such projects as “One Belt, One Road” and “Chinese culture going global” led by the Chinese government, that it has attracted attention.

Against such background, proposals of reducing the heat of English learning and lowering its importance have been made. In 2013, Wang Xuming, the former spokesman of China’s Education Ministry and now President of Language and Culture Press, in his verified Sina Microblog account called for cancellation of English teaching in the primary schools and increase classes on *Guoxue*, or traditional Chinese culture, which has stirred intense discussion among the netizens.¹ Later, during the Two Sessions in 2014, some experts proposed to lower the weight of English in *Gaokao* (college entrance examination) or even to remove English from the exam altogether—and again, during the Two Sessions in 2021, Xu Jin, one of the national committee members, proposed that English should be removed as a compulsory course for primary and secondary school students². *Gaokao* is without doubt the most important examination for most Chinese people, and any changes of it would lead to a big and long-lasting impact on most of the people. One important move taken by the Education Ministry was that in 2019, it allowed English to be taken twice during the year, with the higher score submitted.

The above review shows that China’s educational pendulum always swung between English as an important practical tool for China to connect with the world and English as a threat to Chinese language and culture. Indeed, the learning of English and traditional culture should not be a zero-sum scenario, that is, the gains of one language would be counterbalanced by the loss of the other language. Instead, English as a global language, or *lingua franca*, can be used globally with not only the “native-English-speakers”, but also non-native English speakers. In China, the integration of traditional Chinese culture with English learning is very likely a desirable way to reduce the “threat” English has brought about.

¹ See *Global Times*, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/810210.shtml>; *South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1308593/wang-xuming-prominent-voice-education-field-calls-less-english-language>

² See *Global Times*, “Chinese lawmaker proposes removing English as core subject” <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1217396.shtml>

Research Design

Research Questions

This research investigates the current situation of integrating Chinese culture into college English teaching. The main issues to be discussed are: (1) College students' ability to express Chinese culture in English; (2) College students' need to express Chinese culture in English; (3) College students' attitude towards integrating Chinese culture into college English.

Research Methodology and Research Design

In order to explore to what extent can contemporary non-English-major undergraduates convey Chinese culture in English, this questionnaire intends to figure out: Firstly, whether the college students know about traditional Chinese culture. Secondly, whether the students can translate certain words or phrases related to Chinese culture. Thirdly, whether the students can share with others the implications of Chinese cultures in English.

A total of 118 valid answer sheets were collected. As is mentioned, this survey has chosen the non-English-major students who are fluent in English, because this research not only concerns about the problem of simple English expression of Chinese culture, but also about whether the students can express the implicit significance of the cultural phenomena. It is obvious that if the students have difficulties in simple expression of English, it is impossible to complete this more difficult task. Thus, the respondents are chosen from the freshmen and sophomores of the non-English majors from South China University of Technology, most of their scores of English in *Gaokao* is above-138 (full score 150), with most freshmen passed CET-4 with high score and most sophomores passed CET-6. To make the sample more representative, a wide range of majors are covered, including Electrical Engineering and Automation, Software Engineering, Law, Environmental Science and Engineering, Communication, Biopharmaceuticals, Statistics, Mechanical Engineering, Accounting, Economics, Vehicle Engineering, Materials, Ecommerce, and so on.

Results and Discussion

The Ability of Expressing Chinese Culture in English

This survey shows that the vast majority of college students have extensive but not in-depth understanding of Chinese culture. When asked about whether they can express terms, stories, or classics about Chinese culture in English, 80% of them said they "can only express some, but not much" or "not at all". It should be noticed that about 65% of them "know a lot about Chinese culture but not quite well", only 5% "can express in English relevant nouns, tell the background stories, and explain their ideological connotation and cultural logic." On the one hand, as Zheng (2014, p. 37) argues, "the absence of global English cultural products" or "the one-way distribution of Anglophone cultural products" may have shaped Chinese learners' preference for Anglophone cultures rather than Chinese cultures, which results in their poor competency in sharing Chinese culture in English. On the other hand, however, as is known to all, in-depth understanding is the prerequisite for correct expression, so, the students' poor English proficiency in conveying Chinese culture is also probably resulted from their poor proficiency in Chinese culture *per se*. This is also the reason why more students are able to

translate certain terms or stories of Chinese culture into English (74% and 69% respectively) while less students (47%) can express the related thoughts and stories.

Table 1

College Student's Ability of Expressing Chinese Culture in English

	Questions	Main Opinions	Other Opinions
1	Do you think you know quite well about Chinese culture, like Chinese folklore, history, literature and art?	65% "know a lot but not quite well"; 31% "only know some nouns".	3% "know Chinese culture quite well".
2	Can you express in English the terms about Chinese traditional holidays, food, history, literature and art?	74% "can only express some terms, but not much"; 5% "not at all".	19% "can express most of them";
3	Can you introduce in English the background of traditional Chinese holidays, food, historical figures, and literary and artistic works?	69% "can only express some, but not much"; 14% "not at all".	14% "can introduce most of them without difficulty";
4	To what extent can you explain Chinese culture in English?	47% "can express both the nouns and related stories and thoughts in English"; 33% "can only talk about some nouns but not know the related background and thoughts"	5% "can express in English relevant nouns, tell the background stories, and explain their ideological connotation and cultural logic."

College Students' Demand of Learning Chinese Culture in English

As is mentioned before, English teaching often stress more importance on the culture of "target language", which results in the awkward situation that Chinese students are not able to share with their foreign friends their native culture. This survey reveals similar results. Up to 78% of the respondents said it is expected that they will have the occasion when they need to share their native culture in English, and most of them will to share Chinese culture with foreigners, but they have difficulties in translation.

What's more, even though the respondents have a comparatively good command of English, up to 86% of them confess that they need teachers' guidance in learning Chinese culture in English, and most of them hope that their teachers can take the initiative to integrate Chinese culture in English teaching. In terms of teaching strategies, 69% of the students hold that Chinese culture should be added in the textbooks, 58% believe that the schools should set up courses on Chinese culture taught in English, 52% suggest that the students should read or watch materials about Chinese culture in English, 42% agree that the competency of conveying Chinese in English should be tested in all kinds of English examinations, and 33% hold that there should be seminars on Chinese culture. Overall speaking, for most of the correspondents, it is desirable to learn Chinese culture in the College English classes.

Table 2

The Needs of College Students for the English Expression of Chinese Culture

	Questions	Main Opinions	Other Opinions
7	Do you think you will have the opportunity to introduce Chinese culture in English?	66% "don't have such opportunity by far, but there should be such opportunity in the future"; 12% "have many such opportunities, such as taking exams, communicating with friends/teachers from other countries etc."	22% "don't have such opportunity by far, and will not have such opportunities in the future."

8	If you have the opportunity, would you take the initiative to introduce Chinese culture to your friends from western countries?	67% “will do so, but may not be able to express it fluently because of the poor English competency”. 11% “will do so, because of the pride and willingness to share Chinese culture with the world”	16% “maybe”; 6% “haven’t thought of this before.”
9	What do you think can improve your ability to express Chinese culture in English (multiple choice questions)	69% suggest that Chinese culture should be added in the textbooks; 58% suggest that schools should set up courses on Chinese culture taught in English; 52% suggest that reading English books or newspaper on Chinese culture would be helpful;	42% suggest that relevant competency should be tested in the English competency examinations. 33% suggest that attending seminars on Chinese culture would be helpful.

Students’ Attitudes Towards Integrating Chinese Culture into College English

The survey shows that up to 74% of the students hold that “the proportion of Chinese culture and English culture in the textbook should be balanced”, because current textbooks stress more on the Anglophone cultures. As has been mentioned above, English teaching in China prefers Anglophone cultures, or the culture of native speakers in English, rather than local Chinese culture, be it English majors or not. Correspondingly, most English Departments in domestic China have set up courses about western cultures, such as “American Society and Culture”, “Introduction to the Britain and the United States”, and “Cross-cultural Studies” and so on, but very few have set up courses on Chinese culture. It is not exaggerated to say that English learning in China is to learn both the language and culture, rather than English as a *lingua franca*.

The survey shows that 92% of the students regard it important to integrate Chinese culture into college English teaching and up to 96% hope that their college English teacher can integrate this part in the course, all reveal that the students are very much willing to learn Chinese culture in English. However, only 5% of them hold that they will learn it even if it is not required by their teachers and only 14% said that they can learn it well by self-learning, both suggest the importance of teachers’ guidance and the urgency of reforming traditional teaching resources and methodologies.

Table 3

Attitudes of College Students to Learn Chinese Culture in English

	Questions	Main Opinions	Other Opinions
11	Will you take the initiative to read first-hand resources about Chinese in English?	59% “unlikely”; 28% “only occasionally”;	5% “Yes, I will, because I am interested in it.”
12	Do you think it necessary to integrate Chinese culture into college English teaching?	91% “necessary”.	8% “basically unnecessary”
13	Do you think that Chinese culture and English culture should have equal weights in college English teaching?	74% “agree, the ratio of the two should be balanced”	18% “disagree, English culture should over-weigh Chinese culture”; 8% “disagree, Chinese culture should over-weigh English culture”
14	Do you expect your college English teacher to talk more about Chinese culture?	43% “very much hope so, because I am very interested in this and think it is necessary to learn”; 53% “not that desirable, but it is OK to learn.”	3% “basically don’t have such expectation”; 1% “not at all”.

Notwithstanding, the sample of this survey is too small to draw any definite generalization of these findings, but it seems that these students, who have learned English for so long a time (most of them start learning English at or even before primary schools), and who claim a good master of English, still have difficulties in expressing mother-tongue culture in English. What's more, most of them are supportive of the idea of integrating Chinese culture in College English learning.

Strategies of Integrating Chinese Culture into College English

The above survey and analysis reveal that reforms of College English are desirable and it is suggested that improvements should be made in teaching sources, teachers and assessments.

First of all, it is without doubt that both the syllabus and the textbooks play an important role in teaching. As some Chinese scholars have advised, the college English syllabus should be revised to involve traditional Chinese culture. (Xiao et al., 2010, p. 46) College English Syllabus may be of slight differences among different colleges in China, but all are made based on the requirement of the "College English Curriculum Requirements" promulgated by the Education Ministry. Therefore, reforms should start with the "Requirements" and the "Syllabus".

Likewise, the textbooks also play a leading role in College English teaching. As has been mentioned, Chinese cultures are absent in most textbooks, so the revision and renewal of the textbooks are urgent. In 2020, the new textbook *New College English: Ideological-Political Course* edited by Li Yun was published, which is a beneficial attempt towards this issue, because it has induced critical thinking on traditional Chinese values and contemporary westerns thought by selection of some famous excerpts written by celebrities from both China and the western world. This is also an attempt echoing the "Guidelines for the Ideological and Political Construction of Higher Education Curriculum" by the Education Ministry released in 2020, and it is expected that more efforts would be made in this respect in the coming years.

Third, the Chinese cultural literacy of the College English teachers should be improved. As is discussed, the majority of College English teachers in China were of English majors who did not receive much training or learning of Chinese culture because too much emphasis has been put on Anglophone cultures. Thus, they need further training or learning to make themselves qualify enough to meet the demands of the students. The teachers should be encouraged to take lessons or attend seminars on Chinese cultures and different departments or institutes may have some cooperation.

Last but not the least, adjustments should be made for the assessments of English. It is obvious that the test has an important counter-effect on teaching, especially for traditional examination-oriented teaching in China, as is shown by the slight reform of CET in 2013, which has impelled more students to learn Chinese culture in English. Besides, cross-cultural communication competency has always been one of the most important teaching goals of College English education in China, therefore, in-class practices should also be adjusted to involve both Chinese and western cultures.

Conclusion

The history of English pedagogy shows that English has been regarded as both an important tool and a cultural threat in China, and traditional College English teaching stressed Anglophone cultures while ignored

Chinese ones, which have led to serious consequences, as can be proved by a survey conducted in a prestigious university in China, showing that even for non-English majors with good English competency, their ability to express Chinese culture in English is still weak. Therefore, it is suggested that for a course related to two languages and cultures, College English should at least strike a balance between native language culture and targeted-language culture, rather than emphasizing the study of western cultures solely. The integration of Chinese culture into College English teaching can be achieved by such ways as re-editing the “Syllabus”, renewing textbooks, improving teachers’ competency, and revising the assessment methodologies.

Actually, in recent years, with changes in international political and economic situations, the Education Ministry of China have made some new adaptations in College English teaching, aiming to increase the importance of Chinese cultures. However, instead of reducing the weight of English in education, as some experts have argued, this paper holds that English should be restored to its place as a *lingua franca*, because the improvement of college students’ ability to express Chinese language and culture is a prerequisite for improving students’ ability of cross-cultural communication and for Chinese culture to go global. Given the fact that College English is the only compulsory course for most non-English-majors in China to learn English, it is maintained that the reform of college English education is urgent and desirable. Still, it should be noted that College English cannot simply become a course to teach Chinese culture in English, let alone isolating foreign cultures and sticking to nativism.

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