

Original Paper

The Integration of Chinese Culture in College English Teaching

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Abstract

There's been a lot of talk lately about getting Chinese culture into college English classes. I think this is long overdue. The real problem we face is what researchers call "Chinese culture aphasia"—our students simply don't have the words in English to talk about their own traditions, festivals, or even everyday food. That's a pretty serious gap if you ask me. This paper draws on existing studies to look at why this happens, what it looks like in practice, and why it matters. My own view is that a more balanced curriculum doesn't just help students communicate better—it also gives them a clearer sense of who they are. And that, I'd argue, is exactly what we need if we want our graduates to hold their own in international settings.

Keywords

Integration, Chinese Culture, College English, teaching

1. The Background of Chinese Culture's Infiltration in College English

Language and culture are tied together—that's a basic fact nobody in teaching would dispute. But here's the thing: in Chinese universities, we've been interpreting this connection in a pretty lopsided way for decades. The whole focus has been on helping students understand Western, especially English-speaking, cultures. The assumption was that if you get the cultural references, you'll understand the language better and sound more like a native speaker. That sounds reasonable enough on the surface. But the unintended consequence is that we've created a huge blind spot: Chinese culture has been almost completely left out of the English curriculum.

Zhang and Zhu's study at Tsinghua is a real eye-opener here. They found that most non-English majors just can't manage to describe even basic Chinese things in English—things like dim sum, the Dragon Boat Festival, or the Great Wall (Zhang & Zhu 36). That's not because they don't know these things. They do. It's because they've never been taught the English for them. Scholars later started calling this "Chinese culture aphasia," and I think the term is spot on. It signals a fundamental failure in how we prepare students for real-world communication, which is never one-way. You're always explaining your own context to someone else. So in this paper, I want to walk through what the research tells us about this

problem, why fixing it matters, and what practical steps we might take.

2. Theoretical Background of Chinese Culture Integration in Teaching Process

Before we get into solutions, we need to clear up a couple of theoretical points. The big one is the distinction between "China English" and "Chinglish." Wang Rongpei and others have argued pretty convincingly that "China English" should be seen as a legitimate variety—basically, English with Chinese characteristics that still sticks to a standard core. It covers vocabulary and expressions that have been adapted to fit Chinese social and political realities, like "guanxi," "One country, two systems," or "xiaokang society." These terms are actually becoming more recognizable internationally, which is worth noting.

Now, this is totally different from "Chinglish," which is just faulty English caused by Chinese grammar getting in the way, and it usually muddles rather than clarifies communication (Li 85). The important point here is that embracing "China English" gives us a theoretical green light to include Chinese cultural expressions in our teaching. We're not correcting errors anymore—we're building a legitimate communicative resource.

There's another theoretical angle worth bringing in, and that's cultural balance. Cui makes a good case that real intercultural competence doesn't come from just learning about one target culture. It comes from comparing, contrasting, and negotiating meaning between cultures (Cui 88). So we shouldn't be suppressing students' native culture—we should be using it as a reference point. Li Difei has been quite critical of the current state of textbooks, pointing out that Anglo-American content dominates to the point where Chinese culture barely shows up (Li 86). Some scholars worry this leads to what they call "negative migration"—students start over-valuing the target culture and undervaluing their own (Cui 87). I think that's a legitimate concern. So integrating Chinese culture isn't just about adding material—it's about correcting a distortion that's been there for too long.

3. Current Situation and Problems in Actual Teaching

If you actually look at what's happening in college English classrooms, the marginalization of Chinese culture shows up in multiple places. The most visible evidence is in the textbooks. Zhang and Zhu went through the materials used at Tsinghua and found they were packed with articles and examples from Western life, with very little on Chinese themes (Zhang & Zhu 36). Li echoes this, describing the situation as a "vacant state" when it comes to Chinese cultural content (Li 85).

This bias doesn't stay on the page—it shapes what happens in the classroom too. Teachers, whether local or native speakers, tend to spend most of their time explaining Western cultural references in the texts. There's rarely any systematic effort to help students figure out how to talk about the Chinese equivalents. What's interesting from Zhang and Zhu's interviews with teachers is that even when instructors felt they should add some Chinese content, they weren't always sure what the accepted English expressions were (Zhang & Zhu 37). So it's not just a lack of will—there's a genuine knowledge gap.

The consequences for students are pretty stark. Zhang and Zhu ran a controlled test with 126 participants. When asked to provide English terms for ten common Chinese foods, only 22.46% gave acceptable answers. For describing a festival or a historical site, the figures were below 31% (Zhang & Zhu 38). The errors weren't just about getting words wrong—they were conceptual. Students came up with awkward paraphrases like describing the Spring Festival as a time for "family dinner" and "fire guns," or they just transliterated because they didn't know the established terms (Jin 80). And this isn't just an undergraduate problem. Cui notes that even postgraduate students and scholars get stuck when asked to discuss Confucianism or translate titles of Chinese literary classics, sometimes with embarrassing results (Cui 89). So the issue isn't that students lack cultural knowledge—they don't. The issue is that they lack the English to express what they already know.

4. The Importance of Integrating Chinese Culture in College English Teaching

So why should we bother fixing this? I don't think this is about nationalism or political correctness. There are some very practical reasons.

For one thing, real communication is a two-way street. Cui makes this point clearly, it's not just about receiving information from one culture, it's about giving back (Cui 86). Chinese English users will constantly find themselves in situations where they need to explain their own culture, whether that's at an international conference, a business meeting, or just chatting with a foreign friend. If our curriculum doesn't prepare them for that, we're turning them into passive recipients rather than active participants. There's something else here we don't talk about enough. English learning doesn't happen in a vacuum—Western media is everywhere, and honestly, I see it in my own classroom. Some students start to feel their own culture doesn't quite measure up. It's subtle, but it's there.

Jin suggests bringing Chinese culture into English teaching as a counterbalance. He calls it "patriotism education" (Jin 81). I'm not totally comfortable with that label—sounds a bit top-down. But the point holds. When students learn to talk about Daoist ideas, or *Dream of the Red Chamber*, or the logic behind certain policies, something changes. They're not just memorizing words. They're learning to present their own culture accurately and without awkwardness. That pushes back against stereotypes, I think, and gives them real confidence in international settings—not starting from a deficit, but knowing what they have to say and how to say it.

And then there's the bigger picture. Zhang and Zhu made an observation that I think is still very relevant: every university graduate is a potential "cultural ambassador" (Zhang & Zhu 36). With China's growing international role, like the Belt and Road Initiative, participation in global governance, and all of that, we simply need people who can not only understand the world but also explain China to the world. Therefore mastering "China English" for cultural narration isn't just a nice-to-have—it's a genuine soft power skill. It allows for more accurate transmission of China's development concepts, historical legacy, and contemporary innovations, which in turn facilitates mutual understanding and reduces the potential for conflict born of cultural misunderstanding.

5. Strategies for Chinese Culture Integration in College English Classroom

So how do we actually do this? I think we need to work at multiple levels.

At the top, the guiding documents for college English need revision. Zhang and Zhu explicitly recommend that teaching syllabi should "incorporate Chinese culture as a component of English teaching plans" (Zhang & Zhu 38). The national *College English Curriculum Requirements* should mandate not just understanding of Western cultures but also the ability to describe Chinese culture. That would create a top-down push for change.

Then there's the textbook issue. As Zhang and Zhu suggest, editors should proactively include "English articles and translations reflecting Chinese culture" in reading anthologies and design listening and speaking tasks set in familiar Chinese contexts (Zhang & Zhu 34). Li Difei advocates for including authentic "China English" texts—like well-written articles from *China Daily* or *Beijing Review*, or good English translations of Chinese literature and philosophy (Li 85). These give students authoritative models to work from.

But none of this happens if teachers aren't prepared. Most of us never learned how to talk about Chinese culture in English either. Jin makes this point clearly—teachers need to "enhance their own understanding of Chinese culture and develop a sense of responsibility for cultural transmission" (Jin 79). I'd go further and say we need real support. Workshops, reference materials, model texts. Give teachers the tools, and they'll make it work. Without that, all the textbook changes won't amount to much.

6. Challenges and Considerations

One worry that keeps coming up is whether emphasizing "China English" might water down what we think of as "standard" English. Some colleagues fear it could legitimize errors or hold students back from being understood internationally. I think that concern is legitimate, but it's also manageable. We can frame "China English" not as a replacement for standard English, but as an additional tool that students draw on when the situation calls for it. The goal hasn't changed. We still want communicative effectiveness. We're not saying students should uncritically adopt non-standard forms.

Another practical issue is that we don't have consistent translations for many culture-specific terms. Different sources give different versions for concepts like "小康社会" (moderately prosperous society) or "国学" (Chinese classics). This is confusing for teachers and students alike. What we need is some collaborative effort among linguists, translators, and educators to put together authoritative glossaries and style guides that we can actually use in teaching.

Finally, the principle of balance must be vigilantly maintained. The objective is not to swing the pendulum from an Anglo-centric to a Sino-centric curriculum but to achieve a harmonious equilibrium. We are not trying to replace one form of cultural dominance with another. That would simply reverse the problem rather than solve it. What we want is something more nuanced, a curriculum where both Chinese and Western cultural content have their place and students learn to navigate between them with ease.

As Cui cautions, integration should follow principles of "moderation, communication, and balance" (Cui

88). These three words capture something important. Moderation means we don't overcorrect. Communication means the goal is mutual understanding, not cultural propaganda. Balance means we keep both sides in view. Chinese cultural content should serve the overarching goal of improving comprehensive English proficiency and intercultural skills. It should not transform English classes into courses on Chinese studies delivered in English. That would defeat the purpose entirely. Students are there to learn English, not to sit through cultural lectures. The cultural content is a vehicle for language development, not an end in itself.

7. Conclusion

I believe bringing Chinese culture into college English teaching is something we should have done a long time ago. The current model focuses so heavily on Western content that we've produced a generation of learners who, even with decent language skills, can't talk about their own culture in English. That's what "Chinese culture aphasia" means to me. They've got the language, but they don't have the vocabulary for their own world.

This gap hurts genuine two-way communication. It weakens cultural confidence. And it limits how effectively China can engage globally. So we need to work on multiple fronts at once. Revise syllabi and textbooks. Rethink teaching methods so they emphasize comparison and active cultural expression. Make sure teachers have the training and resources they need.

Yes, there are challenges around linguistic standards and pedagogical balance. But none of them are insurmountable. If we embrace "China English" as a legitimate pedagogical tool, and if we put students' own cultural background back at the center of English learning, we can prepare them much better for international exchange. They'll have linguistic skill, cultural awareness, and the confidence to speak for China with clarity. As Zhang and Zhu put it, this isn't just an academic adjustment. It's "a need for communication and an imperative of the times" (Zhang & Zhu 39).

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