

Cultural Content in High School English Textbooks in China: Analysis of Types, Themes, and Students' Attitudes

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Abstract

This study investigates the types and themes of cultural content in the most recent high school English textbooks published by People's Education Press (PEP) in China, alongside high school students' attitudes towards this cultural content. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research analyzed the cultural content within these textbooks and gathered insights from 200 high school students using surveys and semi-structured interviews. The results indicate a predominant emphasis on the source language culture within the textbooks, with significant representation of target language culture and content of international culture. Students generally exhibit a positive attitude towards the cultural content, particularly towards the source language culture. Additionally, students show a higher interest in small 'C' cultural content closely related to daily life, such as food and customs. This study underscores the importance of integrating cultural content in English language education, contributing significantly to the enhancement of students' cultural understanding and their active engagement in a global context.

Keywords: Cultural Content, High School English Textbooks, Students' Attitudes.

Introduction

In today's globalized and culturally diverse world, the integration of cultural content into English teaching is becoming increasingly important. Learning a foreign language fluently requires more than just language ability; it also requires a thorough understanding and appreciation of culture (Kramsch, 1993; Corbett, 2008). For more successful language acquisition, Kramsch (1993) emphasizes the importance of improving language learners' cultural awareness and integrating language culture into teaching. Textbooks, as the main

source of cultural input for students, play a pivotal role in language learning and teaching (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003).

With the reform of China's college entrance examination system, the latest high school English textbooks published by People's Education Press (PEP) have become a necessity for English teaching. These materials are designed to improve students' language skills, cultural awareness, cognitive abilities and general learning abilities, and are aligned with the curriculum and learning objectives. Embracing the concepts of "cultural confidence" and "global citizenship", there is an increasing emphasis on improving students' cultural awareness and communication skills.

Despite these advances, there has been a lack of comprehensive research on how students understand the cultural content of these updated textbooks. Previous studies have tended to focus on the representation of Anglo-American cultural elements and the minimal tolerance of local or multiple international cultures in textbooks. For example, Liu, Zhang, and May (2021), find that Anglo-American cultural representations dominate college English textbooks in China, highlighting an imbalance that may affect students' cultural perspectives. Similarly, Song (2019), points out that local and source cultures are underrepresented in the new concept English textbooks used by cram schools.

This study addresses the following specific problems: cultural expression in high school English textbooks is seriously unbalanced, with excessive emphasis on British and American culture and little inclusion of Chinese and other international cultures (Liu et al., 2021; Zhang & Su, 2021). There is limited research on high school students' attitudes toward cultural content in these textbooks, which is critical to understanding the effectiveness of cultural integration in language learning. Moreover, the impact of this cultural content on students' overall cultural awareness and their ability to function as citizens of the world is unclear.

In order to bridge these gaps, this study will analyze the cultural contents of the latest high school English textbooks and explore the attitudes of high school students towards these contents. By understanding these concepts, educators and policymakers can better assess the effectiveness of these textbooks in promoting cultural awareness and appreciation.

While previous research has identified an imbalance in cultural representation and the dominance of Anglo-American culture in English language textbooks, few studies have focused on students' perspectives, especially in the context of Chinese high school education. This study contributes to the existing literature by gaining insight into student attitudes towards cultural content, thereby providing valuable feedback to textbook developers and educators who aim to create more inclusive and effective language learning environments.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to analyze the types and themes of cultural content in the latest edition of high school English textbooks and to explore students' attitudes towards cultural contentst presented in these English textbooks.

Research Questions

What types and themes of cultural content are presented in the latest edition of high school English textbooks in China?

What are students' attitudes towards the cultural content presented in these English textbooks?

Literature Review

The close connection between culture and language is reflected in the definitions of different scholars. Street (1993), considers culture as a difficult concept to define and Lado (1957), describes it as people's way of life. Byram (1994), extends culture to the overall way of life of a foreign country covering areas such as art and philosophy. Samovar, McDaniel, Porter and Roy (2013), on the other hand, view culture as a collection of multiple dimensions such as knowledge, beliefs, values, actions, attitudes, etc., which are the product of individual and social practices. This plurality of definitions highlights the broad connotation of culture and its importance in the lives of individuals and groups. At the same time, Gül (2021), recognizes language as a fundamental medium for cultural transmission, and he thinks that learning language involves cultural learning. This further emphasizes the inseparable link between language and culture.

Tomalin and Stempleski (1993), categorizes culture into two main types: big "C" culture or "achievement" Culture and Small "C" Culture or "Behavioral" Culture. According to them, big "C" culture includes cultural themes such as history, geography, institutions, literature, art, music and lifestyle. Regarding small "C" culture, they argue that small "C" culture or "behavioral" culture includes "culturally influenced beliefs and perceptions, especially as expressed through language, but also cultural behaviors that influence acceptance by the host community" Peterson (2004), classifies the themes of culture into two types. (1) Big "C" or "visible" culture; and (2) Small "C" or "invisible" culture. According to him, big 'C' cultures are 'major, classical or grandiose cultural themes', whereas small 'C' cultures are regarded as 'minor or ordinary cultural themes' (Peterson, 2004: 24-25). Cortazzi & Jin (1999), distinguished between three types of cultural information that can be used in language textbooks : source culture, target culture, and international culture.

The way cultural content is presented in textbooks has also received research attention. Some studies have focused on the ways in which big "C" culture and small "C" culture are presented in textbooks. For example, Lee (2009), studied Korean high school EFL conversation textbooks and found that the textbooks mainly presented big "C" culture and paid relatively little attention to small "C" culture. Dehbozorgi et al (2014), study found that three Iranian EFL textbooks contained both big "C" and small "C" cultures, especially the target culture. Rodriguez's (2015), study showed that cultural topics in textbooks were mainly focused on surface culture, which typically refers to the visible and tangible aspects of a culture such as dress, music, food, and festivals, rather than exploring the deeper values, beliefs, and customs that underlie a society.

Textbooks play a key role in language teaching and learning as the main teaching resource in the EFL classroom, which not only provides knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but also stimulates students' interest in participating in classroom activities (Cunningworth, 1995). Textbooks play an irreplaceable role in the teaching and learning process as a bridge of communication between teachers and students (Cabrera, 2014).

Research in recent years has shown that integrating cultural content into English language teaching is crucial for developing students' global citizenship and intercultural communicative

competence (Jing, 2023). For example, Davidson and Liu's (2020), study explored the presentation of culture and perceptions of global citizenship in Japanese elementary school English textbooks and found that cultural content in textbooks is crucial for developing students' global perspectives and intercultural communicative competence. Vashkyavichus et al (2022), study also emphasized the importance of presenting national and cultural values in English textbooks, which is crucial for students to understand and respect different cultures.

In addition, Gheitasi (2020), emphasized the importance of increasing the presentation of the target language and international cultures in EFL textbooks in order to promote more inclusive attitudes among students and innovation and development of their own cultures. Kongsom's (2016), study showed that both students and teachers in Thailand supported the adequate presentation of different cultural content in textbooks. Abdollahzadeh and Baniasad's (2010), study also found that some Iranian teachers and students are supportive of cultural content in EFL textbooks and believe that these content are beneficial to their ideology and communicative competence.

Syarif and Mulyono's (2023), study analyzed the presentation of culture and gender in English EFL textbooks used by Indonesian high school students and emphasized the importance of diversity and balance of cultural content in textbooks. Together, these studies emphasize the importance of effectively integrating cultural content in textbooks and the importance of this content in deepening students' understanding of the role of culture in English language teaching and learning, enhancing intercultural communicative competence, and developing cultural confidence.

To summarize, language and culture are closely intertwined. Textbooks, as the main teaching tools, incorporate cultural content to help cultivate students' global citizenship and intercultural communicative competence. Research from various perspectives indicates that incorporating cultural content in textbooks is instrumental in fostering students' intercultural awareness and communicative skills. Consequently, examining effective methods for integrating cultural content into textbooks, along with a thorough analysis of students' attitudes towards cultural content and their approach to cultural learning, holds substantial theoretical and practical value. This exploration is crucial for enriching our understanding of culture's role in English language education, advancing students' intercultural communicative competence, and cultivating cultural awareness, thereby equipping them for the demands of a globalized society.

Research Methodology

1. Participants

This research was carried out in a public high school, employing a purposive sampling technique. It involved 200 students aged 16 to 18, all of whom were preparing for the new college entrance examination and using the latest high school English textbooks published by PEP. The participants completed a questionnaire, and additionally, 10 students were selected for a semi-structured interview conducted by the researcher.

2. Research Design

This research adopted a descriptive statistical approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. To gather quantitative data, a questionnaire was

developed, focusing on high school students' attitudes towards cultural content in the most recent English textbooks. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted to corroborate the quantitative findings and to delve into students' deeper insights regarding their experiences with learning cultural content.

Research Instruments

3.1 Senior High School English Textbooks published by PEP

In this study, the researcher analyzed the Senior High School English Textbooks published by PEP in 2019. This version was selected for its widespread use, popularity, and influence within the Chinese educational system. It was carefully revised to meet the development needs of the new era and was produced according to the English Curriculum Standard for High Schools (2017 Edition). Moreover, as students utilized this version of textbook throughout their three years of high school, they were well-positioned to provide objective and accurate feedback on its cultural content. Due to the limitation of time, the researcher just chose one of these series of books. The textbook the researcher chose covers topics such as traditional festivals, dietary differences, finance and space exploration.

3.2 Questionnaire

In order to obtain relevant data, a questionnaire was prepared, which was divided into two parts. First, 22 statement items were designed through a Likert scale. Participants expressed their attitudes from "strongly disagree" (1) to "disagree" (2) to "strongly agree" (5). Secondly, a statement item about students' expectations on cultural topics was included. To assess the validity of the questionnaire, two experts in the field of English language teaching were asked to rate the item's Objective Coherence (IOC) and to correct unclear statements. The internal reliability of the questionnaires returned by all the students was estimated to be 0.96 using Cronbach's alpha, respectively, which meets the criterion.

2.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Sixteen questions were asked to 10 students to gain insights into their attitudes towards learning cultural content in textbooks. In order to verify the scientific validity of the semi-structured interview questions, the researcher asked the three experts to rate the Item Objective Coherence (IOC) again and correct any unclear statements, and provide comments on the translations into Chinese and English. Based on the results of the questionnaire. The semi-structured interview was conducted. To analyze the semi-structured interviews, the researcher transcribed students' responses.

Data analysis and results

1. Results of the analysis of the cultural content of the textbook

The researcher categorized the cultural content of Senior High School English Textbooks published by PEP according to Xiao's (2010), methodology on the cultural categorization of English textbooks. The criteria for textbook analysis were divided into two main groups: the first group includes three types of cultural sources, namely, source culture, target culture, and international culture, and the second group includes two types of cultures, namely, Big "C" culture and Small "C" culture.

As shown in Table 1, the source culture is the most represented in the textbooks, accounting for 43.1% of the total cultural content. Within the source culture, the distribution

is almost even between Big "C" and Small "C" cultures. The target culture comprises 36.2% of the total, with a greater emphasis on Big "C" culture. International culture is the least represented, making up 20.4% of the total, with an equal distribution between Big "C" and Small "C" cultures. Overall, Big "C" culture is slightly more represented than Small "C" culture in this textbooks.

Table 1

Frequency and percentage of cultural types presented in the textbook

	Number of tasks	target culture		Source culture		International culture	
		Big "C"	Small "C"	Big "C"	Small "C"	Big "C"	Small "C"
Total (frequency)	44	8	8	10	9	5	4
		16		19		9	
Total (percentage)		18.1%	18.1%	22.7%	20.4%	11.3%	9.1%
		36.2%		43.1%		20.4%	

In order to further investigate the distribution of cultural themes under the Big "C" and Small "C" culture, the occurrence of a total of 12 cultural themes were calculated. As shown in Table 2, the most frequently occurring theme in the textbooks is Science from the Big "C" culture, with 12 occurrences (19.4%). The second most frequent theme is Social norms, also from the Big "C" culture, with 9 occurrences (14.5%). Cultural value from the Small "C" culture and Festival from the Small "C" culture are tied for the third most frequent, each with 7 occurrences (11.2% and 14.5%, respectively). Literature from the Big "C" culture and Food from the Small "C" culture are tied for the fifth place, each with 5 occurrences (9.7% and 8.1%, respectively). It's important to note that four themes from Big "C" culture (Science, Social norms, Literature, Architecture) and two from Small "C" culture (Festival, Food) are in the top five.

Table 2

Frequency and percentage of occurrence of each cultural theme

Rankings	Type of culture	Modules					Total	%
		1	2	3	4	5		
	Big "C"(6 themes)							
7	Geography			2			2	3.2%
2=	Social norms		9				9	14.5%
1	Science				12		12	19.4%
6	History			4			4	6.5%
4	Literature					6	6	9.7%
5=	Architecture			5			5	8.1%
	Total		9	11	12	6	36	58.1%
	Small "C" (6 themes)							
3	Festival	7					7	11.2%
5=	Food	3		2			5	8.1%

7=	Hobby			1	1		2	3.2%
2=	Cultural values	2				7	9	14.5%
7=	Customs	1		1			2	3.2%
8	Holiday			1			1	1.6%
Total		13	0	5	1	7	26	41.9%

Results of the survey on high school students' attitudes toward cultural content in the textbooks

To answer research question 2, we can see from Table 3 that students responded "agree" and "strongly agree" to all the items, with mean values ranging from 3.47 to 4.22. The results show that students strongly agree with the depiction of source culture, as indicated by the highest mean score of 4.22. Target culture and international culture both receive a lower but still positive mean score of 3.54 and 3.47, respectively, suggesting general agreement with their representations. The mean score of 3.81 for intercultural communication competence indicates that students agree that the textbook supports the development of these skills. Overall, students appear to be quite satisfied with the cultural content in the textbook, especially with how the source culture is presented.

Table 3

Students' attitudes towards cultural content in the textbook

Different Aspects	N	Mean (M)	SD	Level of agreement
Attitudes toward target culture in the textbook	200	3.54	0.91	Agree
Attitudes toward source culture in the textbook	200	4.22	0.96	Strongly agree
Attitudes towards international culture in the textbook	200	3.47	0.89	Agree
Attitudes towards intercultural communication competence promoted in the textbook.	200	3.81	0.94	Agree

1.00-1.80=Strongly disagree, 1.81-2.60=Disagree, 2.61-3.40=Moderately agree, 3.41-4.20=Agree, 4.21-5.00=Strongly agree

As for the findings of students' expectations of different cultural themes in the textbook. Table 4 shows the ranking of the 200 students' expectations of the different cultural aspects included in the English textbook. Students were most interested in the culture of "Food" with 32.35%, followed by "Customs" with 20.59%, "Holiday" (16.39%), "history" (8.82%), and "science" (7.98%). These results suggest that students have a high interest in cultural content that is closely related to their daily lives (e.g., food and customs) and a relatively low interest in traditional Big C cultural content such as history and science.

Table 4

Ranking of students' expectations of different cultural themes in the textbook

Ranking	Cultural themes	Big C	Small C	Number of respondents (N=200)	%
1	Food		√	77	32.35
2	Customs		√	49	20.59
3	Holiday		√	39	16.39
4	History	√		21	8.82
5	Science	√		19	7.98

Results of the semi-structured interviews on students' attitudes toward cultural content in the textbook.

So as to gain insight into the students' attitudes towards cultural content in English textbooks, the researcher designed semi-structured interviews based on the questionnaire. In order to analyze the data from the semi-structured interview questions, the responses of 10 students were coded and grouped in different category.

Regarding the source culture in English learning, most students agreed that it is important to learn and understand the culture of the source language. Many students responded that it was necessary to learn about the culture of the mother tongue in the English classroom because "learning about the source language culture in the classroom can help us to learn how to express our own culture in English, communicate with foreigners, and spread the Chinese culture" (Student 3).

As for the importance of the culture of the target language, most of the students responded that textbooks should contain activities that introduce the culture of the country where English is spoken as a native language. For example, one student put it this way, "Learning about the culture of a native English-speaking country can expand our horizons and motivate us to learn the language also." (Student 5). Another student responded, "Learning the culture of native English-speaking countries helps us to develop our international perspective and enhance our international competitiveness," (Student 6). In terms of the importance of learning international culture. Half of the students think that learning international culture is necessary, "the world cannot be just one country and a kind of culture, but there are many cultures." (Student 2). Therefore, they should learn it.

When it comes to the importance of cultural learning and language learning, most of the students think that cultural learning is as important as language learning, as one student said, "I think language learning and cultural learning are both important, language learning is more of a kind of competence, while cultural learning is an emotional exchange" (Student 1), but most of them think that it is the lack of language learning that causes them not to be able to communicate smoothly with foreigners.

Regarding the relationship between adhering to confidence of Chinese culture and learning foreign culture, most of the students think that the two are complementary to each other.

One student answered that "culture is both national and global, if we learn more about the culture of the world and then we can better understand the charm of Chinese culture."

Concerning the aspect of expectations for the cultural content of the textbooks, they believed that the English textbooks should have the highest number of source culture, followed by target culture, and finally international culture. In terms of the reasons for this, one student said, "China has been emphasizing cultural confidence, theoretical confidence, road confidence and institutional confidence, and we need to learn to tell the Chinese story in English to build up cultural confidence and spread Chinese culture, so English textbooks should present more Chinese culture so that we can tell the Chinese story well in English."

According to the results of the questionnaire survey, students generally want to learn culture related to customs and food, during the interview, we asked the students about the reasons, student 2 said "customs and food culture are closely related to life, the topics are more practical and simple when communicating with foreigners." At the same time, because of the COVID-19, some students mentioned that new topics related to people's lives should be added. Student 3 also mentioned that the future textbook should include content related to the origin of Chinese civilization, she said, "Nowadays, some foreigners have doubts about the 5,000 years of Chinese civilization, so we should learn to refute it in English and spread Chinese culture".

Discussion

In the subsequent sections, the study's findings will be contrasted with those from previous research. Tang (2022), conducted a comparative study on high school English textbooks published by the Shanghai Education Press, examining the 2017 and 2019 versions. He found that the 2019 version contained significantly more content about Chinese culture than the 2017 version. 2019 version of the textbooks contained a richer and more diverse range of Chinese culture, which is also similar to the results of this study. Zhu (2017), also examined the representation of source culture in English textbooks published by the Shanghai Education Press and the People's Education Press. She observed an increase in the quantity of source culture content in recent years. This increase is closely related to the cultural confidence that has been emphasized for promotion in recent years and reflects the importance we have placed on traditional Chinese culture. Additionally, the study found that the proportion of target culture content was the second highest, only slightly less than that of source culture. The marginal difference between the two suggests that the textbooks have not overlooked the development of students' global citizenship awareness.

The analysis of English textbooks showed that the part of source culture content appeared most frequently in English textbooks. Similar findings were found in the study of Aliakbari (2020), who studied the cultural content of textbook series used in Iranian public secondary schools. The results showed that the highest frequency of occurrence about the culture of the source language, i.e. Persian language and culture, was found in English textbooks. In his study, the results of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were also consistent with the present study. The students responded that the English textbooks they used in secondary schools mainly presented the culture of their home language.

Regarding the cultural themes in textbooks, the results of this study show that the latest version of high school English textbooks published by the People's Education Press (PEP)

includes 12 thematic culture categorized under Big "C" and Small "C". The frequency of Big "C" cultural themes was higher than that of Small "C". The top five themes included 'Science' and 'Social norms' from Big "C" culture, as well as 'Cultural values' and 'Festivals' from Small "C" culture. This is similar to the findings of Matic's (2020) study. The possible reason for this is that Small "C" cultural content is more practical and conducive to being a good starting point for communicating with people from different countries. This view is supported by Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) and Dehbozorgi et al. (2014), who suggest that Small "C" culture should be emphasized in the English classroom to improve English learners' intercultural competence.

Analysis of the questionnaires showed that students agreed that cultural learning was important to them. They also expressed their agreement that the high school English textbooks they used emphasized mainly on the culture of the source language, i.e., Chinese culture. This is similar to the findings of Vashkyavichus et al (2022), et al. that the domestic culture should be taken into full consideration in the selection of foreign language textbooks. At the same time students agreed that textbooks should contain activities that introduce the cultures of the countries where English is spoken as a native language, as this will help them to understand the cultures of these countries. These findings are in line with Chen (2004), and Xiao (2010), whose studies showed that target language culture learning is important for language learners. Culture and language are closely linked, and language is not only a tool for communication, but also a carrier of culture. Knowing the culture of the target language helps to understand the language itself more deeply and improves the effectiveness of language learning (Subandiyah, Yulianto, & Laksono, 2019) On the other hand, learning the culture of the target language helps to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence, enabling them to communicate more effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds (Rabehi, 2016).

As for students' expectations of the cultural content to be included in the English language textbook, the study found that the most desired cultural content was "Food," which belongs to Small "C" culture, followed by "Customs", which also belongs to Small "C" culture. This is similar to the findings of Syarif and Mulyono (2023), whose study found that the most popular cultural aspect of English language materials used by Indonesian high school students was lifestyle, followed by customs and food. It shows that students are particularly interested in the cultural content of everyday life. In addition, Lu and Wang's (2020), study also emphasized the importance of incorporating local cultural content in English language textbooks for high school students. The results of these studies suggest that incorporating cultural content that are familiar and interesting to students, such as food and customs, into textbooks can enhance learners' cultural understanding and interest in language learning. Therefore, textbook writers should consider including more cultural content related to students' daily lives in order to enhance the attractiveness of the textbooks.

Conclusion

This study indicates that the latest high school English textbooks by PEP offer a diverse range of cultural content, receiving positive feedback from students. The material encompasses source, target, and international cultures, predominantly featuring source language culture. Students are particularly drawn to culture about everyday life, categorized as Small "C" culture. This trend highlights the value of integrating culture in English teaching,

as it fosters cultural understanding, intercultural competence, and global awareness. Therefore, textbook authors should prioritize students' cultural interests in future designs, balancing various cultural content to enhance the learning experience. Teachers can also play a pivotal role by effectively incorporating these cultural themes into their teaching, aiding students in developing a well-rounded cultural perspective and intercultural communication skills.

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