

An Analysis of the Representation of Chinese Cultural Figures in Senior High School English Textbooks

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Abstract: Cultural awareness is a core competency of English education and is of great importance to the overall development of students. However, Chinese culture is relatively under-represented in the current English language teaching, and the research on the representation of Chinese cultural figures is still limited. This study systematically analyses the PEP senior high school English textbooks (2019 edition) based on the Guidelines for Integrating Fine Traditional Chinese Culture into Primary and Secondary School Curricula and Textbooks and the analytical framework for cultural representation in English textbooks. The research focuses on the content and forms of representation of Chinese cultural figures in order to explore their importance in enhancing students' cultural awareness. The findings suggest that we need to strengthen the students' sense of cultural identity by not only improving students' knowledge of Chinese culture and inheriting the spirit of traditional culture, but also enhancing their ability to communicate Chinese culture effectively.

Keywords: Senior High School English; English Textbooks; Representation of Cultural Figures

1. Introduction

Language is a vital medium of cultural transmission. English, as a global lingua franca, is playing an increasingly important role in cultural dissemination, intercultural communication and mutual learning among civilisations. In the era of globalisation, the goals of English learning have evolved from simply acquiring linguistic knowledge and communicative competence to encompassing intercultural awareness and cultural understanding. Wen [1] classifies culture into linguistic culture and non-linguistic culture, he believes that multicultural content should be

added to the English textbooks.

The General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised in 2020) (hereinafter referred to as the "New Curriculum Standards") clearly stipulate "cultural awareness" as one of the core competencies of English education to achieve the basic educational task of cultivating students' moral development. The document stresses that students should learn English to grasp the essence of different cultures, enhance cultural confidence, and acquire the ability to engage in intercultural communication and spread Chinese culture abroad. In this context, as Grey [2] put it, senior high school English textbooks are important carriers of cultural content and essential resources for implementing curriculum objectives, and therefore play a particularly important role.

However, the current studies on English textbooks have made progress in the study of multicultural representation, but the presentation of Chinese culture is still lacking in depth, the selection of cultural figures is limited, and the modes of representation are relatively homogeneous. Thus, this study explores the representation characteristics of Chinese cultural figures in PEP senior high school English textbooks. Furthermore, it discusses how they can be useful in spreading Chinese culture and building up students' cultural confidence, so as to provide implications for future textbook development and the improvement of teaching practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Cultural Figures

Cultural celebrities are an important part of fine traditional Chinese culture. The cultural types taxonomy used in this study is based on the framework suggested by Patrick R. Moran [3], which distinguishes culture along five dimensions: cultural products, cultural practices, cultural perspectives, cultural communities, and

cultural figures. Cultural figures are people who are recognised in the public domain of a given cultural community and exert a significant influence on the cultural development of that community. Specifically, they are the people who have been widely recognised by the Chinese nation and even the international community, through historical validation, for defending national independence, freedom and interests, making outstanding contributions to social development, as well as having lasting spiritual value and inspirational significance.

2.2 Research on Cultural Representation in Senior High School English Textbooks

Language and culture are inseparable. Cultural instruction has been gradually recognised as an integral part of language education. In fact, Pu [4] claims that a full understanding of the target language culture can help learners to understand and use the language more precisely and can enhance their intercultural communicative competence effectively. This point of view laid an important theoretical basis for the later research. Further, based on this view, stressed the close relationship between language teaching and cultural instruction, arguing that the use of cultural background knowledge allows students to acquire a better understanding and more effective use of the language.

With the cultural dimension in language education being increasingly recognised, there are an increasing number of studies on how to integrate the fine traditional Chinese culture into foreign language teaching. Lin [5] pointed out the necessity of introducing traditional Chinese culture into foreign language teaching, and put forward the corresponding implementation methods. For example, the proportion of traditional cultural content in textbooks should be increased, and communicative activities with traditional culture as the theme should be carried out. These proposals provided useful guidelines for pedagogical practice. Later, more researchers began to pay attention to the primary and secondary school textbooks and tried to find out how traditional Chinese culture is embedded in the foreign language teaching materials and analyse the proportion of Chinese cultural content, in order to provide suggestions for the textbook reform. Some studies conducted by Wu [6] and Guo [7] found that Chinese culture is still not well reflected in senior high school English textbooks and the spread of fine

traditional Chinese culture needs to be further strengthened. They argued that in the context of globalisation, the overemphasis on Western culture to the detriment of Chinese cultural education is detrimental to students' holistic development. Similarly, Shu [8] emphasised that native culture should not be ignored in foreign language teaching since understanding one's own culture is of great importance in learners' cultural awareness. Therefore, it is necessary to pay more attention to the study of Chinese cultural elements, especially their modes of representation and educational effectiveness in textbooks.

However, more research on the cultural content of senior high school English textbooks has identified other problems. In the textbook representation, English-speaking countries are in the dominant position, followed by international culture and Chinese culture, according to Zhang and Li's study [9]. Similarly, from a semiotic perspective, Chang and Zhang [10] also investigated the cultural presentation in senior high school English textbooks, emphasizing the need for a more balanced and deep integration of Chinese cultural elements. This finding indicates the imbalance of cultural content distribution, and suggests that more attention should be paid to the representation and dissemination of Chinese culture in textbook compilation and classroom instruction.

Systematic studies on the structure, function and proportion of cultural contents in English textbooks have been conducted, but in-depth analysis of the subcategory of "Chinese cultural figures" is still relatively rare. Most of the previous studies have focused on static cultural elements, such as cultural products and festival customs, and few systematic studies have been reported on the representation of Chinese figures. Zhou and Wang [11] point out that cultural figures are an important carrier of cultural content and an important resource of realising curriculum objectives. They have great educational significance in English textbooks and an important channel for introducing Chinese culture to the international community. However, few studies have examined cultural figures as an independent dimension of analysis, and there is a lack of detailed analysis on their cultural themes, domain coverage, and modes of representation. Hence, this study focuses on "cultural figures" and constructs a framework of "cultural themes-cultural domains-modes of

representation” to systematically study the representation of Chinese cultural figures in the PEP senior high school English textbooks, with implications for textbook revision and cultural teaching practice.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

The PEP senior high school English textbooks are widely used in the nation and highly recognised. Therefore, this study chooses the 2019 edition of the PEP senior high school English textbooks as its research corpus, covering the compulsory and selected compulsory volumes and excluding the workbook parts. Are discussed in all seven volumes of the textbook. This study builds a multidimensional analytical framework for analysing the representation of cultural figures in textbooks, in order to assess the extent to which textbooks serve the educational purpose of developing students' cultural awareness and to pinpoint areas for improvement. In particular,

the study aims to answer the following two research questions:

What are the characteristics of representation of Chinese cultural figures in the PEP senior high school English textbooks in terms of cultural themes and domains?

What are the features of the modes of representation of Chinese cultural figures in the PEP senior high school English textbooks?

3.2 Analytical Dimensions and Research Instruments

The fine traditional Chinese culture in this study is classified according to the thematic classification in the Guidelines for Integrating Fine Traditional Chinese Culture into Primary and Secondary School Curricula and Textbooks (see Table 1). Moreover, it refers to the analytical framework of cultural representation in English textbooks proposed by Zhang and Li (see Table 2) to analyse the representation of Chinese cultural figures in the PEP senior high school English textbooks.

Table 1. Thematic Coding for the Presentation of Fine Traditional Chinese Culture (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019)

Core Ideologies and Concepts	Chinese Humanistic Spirit	Traditional Chinese Virtues
Reform and innovate, keep pace with the times	The approach to life of seeking common ground while respecting differences, and achieving harmony without uniformity	The sense of responsibility that every ordinary person has a duty to care for the fate of the nation
Be down-to-earth, seek truth from facts	The educational thought of using literature to convey truth and cultivate people through culture	The patriotic sentiment of devoting oneself to the country and rejuvenating the Chinese nation
Benefit the people, ensure their peace and prosperity	The aesthetic pursuit of integrating form and spirit, and blending scenery with emotion	The social ethos of upholding virtue and aspiring to emulate the virtuous
Follow the law of nature, achieve unity of man and nature	The life philosophy of practicing frugality and self-restraint, and pursuing harmony and balance	The sense of honor and disgrace centered on filial piety, fraternal love, loyalty, trustworthiness, propriety, righteousness, integrity and shame
Be benevolent to people and all creatures, put oneself in others' place	The code of conduct of being sincere, harmonious and selfless, and cultivating both inner and outer virtues	The fine family tradition of respecting the elderly, caring for the young, and living in harmony and unity

Table 2. Framework for Analyzing the Presentation of Culture in Foreign Language Textbooks

Presentation Mode	Description
Cultural Texts	Texts themed on one or more distinct cultural topics, appearing in both the input material and exercise sections of the textbook.
Cultural Knowledge Frames	Dedicated sections in the input materials that introduce structured knowledge about one or more different cultural contents.
Images/Quotations	Visual images and direct quotations included in the input materials and exercises to illustrate or embody cultural content.
Background Cultural Information	Supplementary cultural information provided as background knowledge (e.g., personal names, place names, media references) to support comprehension of cultural texts, images, quotations, or other explicit content.
Activities/Exercises	Language learning activities and exercises themselves, including tasks focused on cultural understanding, cultural expression, and activities embedded with implicit cultural content.

For the coding, the researcher obtained a general knowledge of the principles of coding before the analysis to improve the coding's reliability and

accuracy. The content of Chinese cultural figures in the revised edition of the textbooks was then systematically examined across each volume of

the textbooks. The identified cultural figures were then coded in Excel (a sample of the coding scheme is shown in Table 3). In the coding process, when there was uncertainty or disagreement, two further researchers were invited to join discussions until consensus was

reached. After the coding process, the quantitative data were processed and analysed in Excel, obtaining the frequencies of the different categories of cultural content and modes of representation.

Table 3. Examples of Coding Using the Analytical Framework

Textbook	Chinese Cultural Figure	Cultural Theme	Cultural Field	Presentation Mode	Frequency
Compulsory 1	Laozi	Core Ideologies and Concepts	Philosophy	Images/Quotations	1
	Qin Shi Huang	Core Ideologies and Concepts	History	Background Cultural Information	1
	Lang Ping	Traditional Chinese Virtues	Sports	Cultural Texts	1
Compulsory 2	Confucius	Core Ideologies and Concepts	Philosophy	Cultural Knowledge Frames	1
Compulsory 3	Xin Qiji	Chinese Humanistic Spirit	Literature	Images/Quotations	1
	Lin Qiaozhi	Traditional Chinese Virtues	Medicine	Cultural Texts	1

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Characteristics of the Representation Content of Chinese Cultural Figures

The representation content of Chinese cultural figures in the PEP senior high school English textbooks can be analyzed from two dimensions: cultural themes and cultural domains. The thematic distribution of Chinese cultural figures in the textbooks is illustrated in Figure 1.

■ Core Ideologies and Philosophies ■ Chinese Humanistic Spirit ■ Traditional Chinese Virtues

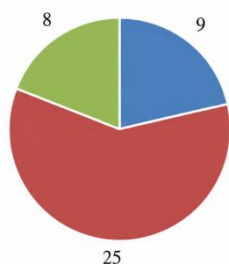


Figure 1. Thematic Representation of Chinese Cultural Figures

Figure 1 illustrates that the most common Chinese cultural figures in the textbooks are “Chinese Humanistic Spirit”, which includes such categories as literature and art, myths and legends, and scientific exploration. This conclusion shows that the Chinese textbooks lay great emphasis on the dissemination of Chinese culture with the promotion of the humanistic spirit. In particular, the category includes 12 figures from the fields of literature and art, 6 figures from the fields of myths and legends, and 7 figures from the fields of science and technology, which demonstrates a strong tendency towards knowledge-oriented and engaging cultural representation. The second largest is related to “Traditional Chinese Virtues”, including such values as patriotism, dedication, benevolence, responsibility, etc., thus

reflecting the moral educational orientation of the textbooks based on Confucian ethics and modern role models. In contrast, the “Core Ideological Concepts” category has a relatively small share and is mainly represented by contemporary figures, accounting for 87.5% of the total within this category. This phenomenon reflects the continuity and reconstruction of traditional ideological concepts in the context of modern society.

However, the thematic distribution is not balanced. While the textbooks show Chinese culture through artistic appreciation, scientific achievements and mythological stories, they pay comparatively insufficient attention to the core aspects of moral norms and ideological enlightenment in traditional culture. As a result, students may be prone to regard Chinese culture as “surface-level entertainment” or historical facts and miss its importance as a system of values and moral basis. By contrast, the theme of “Traditional Chinese Virtues” is predominantly represented by contemporary figures, with a lack of ancient moral exemplars, thus diminishing the historical continuity of traditional virtues. Notably, the “Core Ideological Concepts” section is mainly focused on Confucian thinkers, and does not adequately explore other important schools of thought such as Legalism and Mohism, which limits students’ broad understanding of the intellectual traditions of ancient China.

Therefore, the future development of textbooks should retain the artistic and interesting features of the content of textbooks, but further improve the dimensions of moral inheritance and ideological diversity of Chinese culture. Such improvement would help improve the intellectual depth and structural integrity of cultural representation, thus better serving the

cultivation of students' cultural confidence and core competencies.

Generally speaking, the representation of Chinese cultural figures in the PEP senior high school English textbooks (Table 4) is mainly concentrated in six major domains, i.e. literature,

history, philosophy, science and technology, art and mythology. The coverage shows the richness and multidimensionality of the content of the textbook, offering students broad cultural perspectives and considerable cognitive resources to understand Chinese culture.

Table 4. Representation of Chinese Cultural Figures in PEP Senior High School English Textbooks

Textbook	Represented Figure	Cultural Field
Compulsory 1	Laozi	Philosophy
	Terracotta Army	History
	Qin Shi Huang	History
Compulsory 2	Lang Ping	Sports
	Xuanyuan (Yellow Emperor)	Mythology
	Confucius	Philosophy
Compulsory 3	Xin Qiji	Literature
	Lin Qiaozhi	Medicine
	Confucius	Philosophy
	Mencius	Philosophy
	Zigong	Philosophy
	Sun Wukong	Mythology
	Yang Liwei	Science and Technology
	Wang Yaping	Science and Technology
	Tu Youyou	Medicine
Selective Compulsory 1	Lu Xun	Literature
	I.M. Pei	Architecture
	Wu Mengchao	Medicine
	Zhong Nanshan	Medicine
	Sun Yat-sen	Politics
	Cao Xueqin	Literature
	Mei Lanfang	Art (Theatre/Drama)
	Jade Emperor	Mythology
	Chang'e	Mythology
	Hou Yi	Mythology
	Zhu Bajie (Piggy)	Mythology
	Yuan Longping	Agricultural Science
	Selective Compulsory 2	Qian Xuesen
Pan Jianwei		Science
Zhan Tianyou		Science and Technology
Xu Xiake		Geography
Selective Compulsory 3	Qi Baishi	Art (Painting)
	Tang Yin (Tang Bohu)	Art (Painting)
	Emperor Qianlong	History
	Zhang Zeduan	Art (Painting)
	Sima Qian	History
	Wang Jian	Literature
	Bai Juyi	Literature
Selective Compulsory 4	Su Shi	Literature
	Liu Cixin	Literature
	Li Bing	Science and Technology
	Du Huan	Literature

Among these domains, literature is the most important, with the largest number of cultural figures such as Lu Xun, Cao Xueqin, Su Shi, Bai Juyi, Wang Jian and so on, with more than ten figures in total. This indicates that the textbooks put a lot of emphasis on the achievements of Chinese literature. As pointed out by Zhang [12], the distribution shows a strong bias towards Chinese literature. The second most prominent

domain is philosophy, represented chiefly by Confucian thought. The repeated appearance of such figures as Confucius and Mencius shows that textbook compilers go on believing that Confucian ethics is the core representative of Chinese intellectual traditions.

Figures concerning science, technology and medicine also occupy an important place in the textbooks. Such examples are Qian Xuesen,

Yang Liwei, Lin Qiaozhi and Tu Youyou. The textbooks allocate a relatively large textual space for their life stories and achievements, demonstrating their outstanding achievements in their respective fields, and the admirable cultural spirit they carry. These accessible and engaging portrayals of these figures are meant to inspire students to appreciate their virtues and moral qualities and to be willing to inherit and promote these values. At the same time, these representations also reflect the achievements of China in science, technology and public health, which contributes to the improvement of students' sense of national identity and social awareness.

In art, we have drama, painting, and architecture, as represented by Mei Lanfang, Qi Baishi, Zhang Zeduan, Tang Yin and I.M. Pei. Their existence indicates that the textbooks are acknowledging and celebrating the diversity of Chinese cultural forms.

It is also worth noting that the cultural domains are unevenly distributed in a structural sense. The dominant positions are occupied by the domains related to literature, philosophy and science, while other dimensions equally significant in Chinese culture, such as politics, legal traditions, folk customs and religion receive comparatively limited attention. Moreover, some cultural figures have power in more than one domain, but textbooks tend to pigeonhole them into one field, and thus miss the opportunity to fully appreciate the complexity and multidimensionality of their identities and cultural significance.

In general, the textbooks try to keep a balance between traditional and modern cultural factors in their cultural domain choices, representing both the historical heritage of China and the modern national achievements. Chinese cultural figures are viewed from different angles and in different fields, and the textbooks employ some textual depth to portray the spiritual qualities that the figures represent. Such representations are of great significance for the inheritance and promotion of fine traditional Chinese culture. However, scope for improvement exists with regard to the comprehensiveness of domain coverage and multidimensionality of representation.

4.2 How Chinese Cultural Figures are Presented

To further explore the representation of Chinese

cultural figures in the textbooks, this study adopts the five-dimensional analytical framework of representation modes proposed by Zhang and Li. The representations of Chinese cultural figures in the 2019 version of the PEP senior high school English textbooks were classified and statistically analysed based on this framework. For statistical purposes, frequency counts were used, as there are often multiple forms of the same cultural figure represented within the textbooks. Figure 2 Frequencies of different modes of representation of Chinese cultural figures in the new PEP senior high school English textbooks.

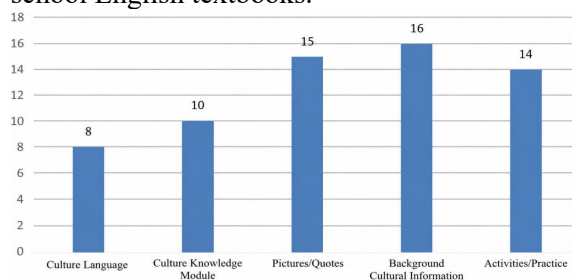


Figure 2. Presentation Mode Frequencies of Chinese Cultural Figures in PEP High School English Textbooks

In the revised PEP senior high school English textbooks, a particular feature is noticeable in the design of the opening pages of each unit: thematic images are paired with quotations from famous figures. This arrangement not only activates students' prior knowledge related to the unit theme, but it also gives teachers a natural entry point for classroom instruction. It is worth noting that the prefaces usually include the representative thoughts of Chinese cultural figures, such as Laozi's philosophy of life on national governance. Cultural figures are also frequently presented in visual formats that combine images with short introductions. As per Huang and Liu [13], students can perceive the figures' appearance, dress, and facial expression more directly through visual representations, thereby improving cultural awareness and emotional engagement. This concrete representation not only assists students in remembering cultural figures but also provides a meaningful foundation for further cultural learning.

And the frequencies of "cultural texts" and "cultural knowledge sections" in the textbooks are relatively close. The overall distribution pattern does not suggest this similarity to be accidental by any means. Instead, it is the textbook compilers' deliberate choice to use

systematic discourse as a useful method to present Chinese cultural figures in a comprehensive and in-depth manner. This representation is not just a listing or a cursory introduction. Instead, it aims to present the identities, achievements, contributions and cultural values behind Chinese cultural figures in a coherent, logical and context-rich way. For example, in Book 2, Unit 3, the textbooks use a complete reading passage to introduce the life and achievements of Lang Ping. This discourse-based presentation supplies students not only with knowledge about the figure itself, but also with a structured training in cultural communication. By analysing the organisational logic of the text, the students learn the frameworks, vocabulary and sentence patterns to introduce cultural figures. As a result, the cultural understanding and language competence are developed simultaneously.

By contrast, the parts marked as “background cultural information” and “activities/exercises” have different frequency characteristics due to the relatively short form and the repeated appearance of the same cultural figures. These sections contain less information in each individual case, but their pedagogical functions are no less indispensable. Background cultural information is a trigger to students’ interest and motivation. Modularized cultural knowledge is a cognitive scaffold for students to gradually build a systematic understanding of Chinese culture. This multi-layered design not only ensures the coherence and integrity of the textbooks, but also better meets the cognitive needs of students. Visual elements, in particular, arouse interest; discourse-based texts enhance understanding; and practical activities strengthen cultural identification. All these elements combine to form a spiral and progressive learning process of Chinese culture.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that although the existing textbooks have made remarkable progress in the representation of Chinese cultural figures and have preliminarily demonstrated the diversity and spiritual richness of Chinese culture, there are still much room for improvement in the balance of content, the integration of cultural categories and the realisation of educational functions. In the future, in the development of textbooks, the selection structure of cultural figures needs to be further

optimised, the representational modes need to be diversified, and the design of culture-related tasks needs to be strengthened, so that the textbooks can better play the role as vehicles to promote fine traditional Chinese culture and cultivate students’ cultural identity and intercultural communicative competence.

This study also has practical implications for senior high school English teachers who want to incorporate Chinese culture instruction into their classroom practice. Teachers can create textbook materials in secondary development and promote the transformation of cultural learning from “input-oriented cognition” to “output-oriented expression” to realise the coordinated development of language learning and cultural education. Teachers can increase students’ cultural awareness and intercultural critical thinking by diversified teaching methods and expanded learning channels, such as thematic enquiry, group discussion and intercultural comparison. Meanwhile, students should be encouraged to take part in the cultural communication practices, such as English speech contests with the theme of Chinese culture or exhibition projects introducing influential Chinese figures. In this way, classroom learning can be extended to authentic communicative contexts, thus improving the students’ output ability of language and their ability to express Chinese culture effectively in intercultural contexts.

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