



# Analysis of the Current Situation of Cultural Content and Chinese Culture in PEP English Textbooks in Junior High School

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## Abstract

Language and culture are inseparable. Teaching materials are not only the container of knowledge, but carry the mission of cultural communication. As the main source of students' learning and teachers' teaching, the content of textbooks plays a very important role in the cultivation of students' knowledge and competence. This paper uses the different cultural classifications proposed by Zhang *et al.* and Zhang to study the structure of cultural content and the specific content of Chinese culture in PEP English textbooks in junior high school. On this basis, the author wishes to find out reasons for “aphasia of Chinese culture”, as well as fill the gap in academic research on textbooks for the lower grades, and provide some theoretical references for junior high school textbook writers.

## Subject Areas

Linguistics

## Keywords

Cultural Content, Junior High School, English Textbooks, Chinese Culture

## 1. Introduction

The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education states that language is both a tool for communication and thinking [1]. It is a crystallization of the wisdom of a country or region. In the circumstance of globalization, it's not enough to learn the language itself. We should have a deep understanding about its deeper social and cultural connotations through its surface [2].

Teaching the content of culture in textbooks helps students to understand

global culture, broaden the international perspective and develop intercultural communication awareness and competence. Cross-cultural communication is two-way based on an equal dialogue under the premise of understanding and respecting the cultural background of both parties.

However, most English language teaching in China focuses on target language culture, and students are encouraged to develop thinking of foreign language. He (1986) believes that learning the target language's culture can not only facilitate foreign language learning but also promote cross-cultural communication [3]. Zhang (1997) believes that learning a language inevitably requires an understanding of the culture of the country where the language is spoken [4]. People in the past had a narrow understanding of language, teaching English as a simple isolated linguistic symbol, where grammar and vocabulary became the entirety of English learning [5]. Zhao (2009) holds that the cultural transmission path of recent interactions between China and the West has been unidirectional, from West to East, involving the spread of Western culture and Christian culture to the East, including China [6].

The result of this teaching model, emphasizing target language culture but ignoring native culture, is that students are unable to express Chinese culture in English. So later there has the phenomenon of "dumb English". To solve the phenomenon of Chinese culture aphasia, many scholars have begun to pay attention to Chinese culture in English textbooks recently, which is not only reflected in the sudden increase in the number of papers on CNKI with keywords such as "Chinese culture" and "English teaching", but also in practice. For example, Ministry of Education vigorously promoted Chinese traditional culture to enter schools, and revised PEP English textbooks in high schools by adding more Chinese cultural elements. Through reading the relevant literature, it can be seen that the research on English textbooks mainly focuses on high schools and universities, and lacks researches for junior high schools and elementary schools.

## 2. The Study of Culture in English Textbooks

Teaching materials are important resources and means of achieving teaching objectives. English textbooks are important carriers of knowledge as well as culture. With the infiltration of Western culture coupled with the weakness of foreign translations of the native culture, people are increasingly aware that simply learning the culture of the target language will only force our Chinese culture into a dilemma. It is not detrimental to building a good international image, may even lead to the loss of cultural identity [7].

Through studying the frequency, proportion, specific cultural dimensions, and characteristics of the presence of foreign cultures in junior high school English textbooks, Huang (2013) discovered that the old textbooks clearly emphasized the promotion of Chinese culture, while the forms of cross-cultural content were somewhat limited [8]. Meng and Chen (2021) researched the distribution of Chinese culture in junior high school English curriculum. The study found

that Chinese cultural content was relatively limited, primarily focusing on food culture, tourism culture, traditional holidays, and mythological stories. It lacked distinctive Chinese rural culture, ethnic minority culture, and advanced socialist culture [9]. Xv (2016) believes that from the perspective of cultural treatment, whether in terms of length or depth of the content of western culture surpasses Chinese culture. English textbook compilers tend to delve into the depth and history of Western culture, which is also why Western culture is disseminated and promoted domestically. In contrast, Chinese culture appears fragmented, lacking in depth, and with limited efforts in exploring its essence [10].

The time in junior high school is a crucial period in the formation of students' world view, outlook on life and values. Learning culture is particularly important at that time. The process of cross-culture communication is not only a matter of economic and political negotiation between two sides, but also cultural encounters and learning from each other. The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education clearly proposes the need to develop students' intercultural communicative awareness and competence, and sets out graded requirements for students' cultural awareness. Initially, students are required to have a preliminary understanding of the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, and later on, by expanding students' exposure to foreign cultures, students can expand their horizons, improve their sensitivity between Chinese and foreign cultures. In addition, level five of cultural awareness asks students introduce main Chinese festivals and typical customs in English. Thus it is clear that the ultimate aim of learning foreign language is to spread Chinese culture and tell Chinese stories in the world, so that people will know, understand and identify with China's excellent culture.

### **3. The Main Classifications of Cultural Content at Home and Abroad**

Cultural studies on textbooks at home and abroad are divided into two main categories: one is the study of the cultural content in textbooks from different perspectives, and the other is the horizontal comparison of the cultural content of different versions of English textbooks. In this paper, I want to investigate the former. Here are some the classification of cultural content.

Foreign scholars put up several classifications. The first is the division of culture into Culture with a capitalized C and Culture with a small C according to Allen and Valette (1997). The former refers to culture in material form, and the latter is more ideological [11]. Also Kachru advocates three concentric circles, *i.e.* inner circle culture, outer circle culture and extended circle culture, as a way to demonstrate the transmission and stratification of English. Thirdly, Byram (1989) divides cultural content into eight aspects at the micro level [12]. The classification of culture by Hector Hammerly (1982) is culture of information, culture of behaviour and culture of achievement [13]. Based on the geographical location of culture, Cortazzi & Jim (1999) classify culture into: native language culture, target language culture and world culture [14].

Chinese scholars also have their different ways to classify the culture. Zhang (1990) proposes to divide culture into knowledge culture and communicative culture according to their functions [15], the difference between the two lies in whether they can correctly understand each other under different cultural backgrounds. Yan (2015) categorizes culture according to its internal level, and divides it into surface culture, middle culture and deep culture [16]. Zeng (2011) further subdivides the connotation of cultural classification, which are physical culture, institutional culture and psychological culture [17]. Later, on the basis of Cortazzi & Jim's cultural classification, Zhang and Zhang (2007) add contrast culture and other culture into native language culture, target language culture and world culture [18]. Contrast culture refers to teaching materials in which two or more cultures are compared, and other culture refers to humanities and scientific and technological knowledge of a more general nature with no obvious national or ethnic background, such as daily life, the natural environment and scientific knowledge.

#### 4. Analysis of PEP English Textbooks

The subject of this paper is the reading section of Go for it English textbooks published by People's Education Press, which consists of five books named book1, book2, book3, book4 and book5 respectively. There are three preparatory units in book1 for linking knowledge between primary school and junior high school. This paper adopts the combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis method to investigate the distribution and content of native culture in English textbooks of junior high school. The reason for choosing the reading section as the object of study is that reading materials take up more percentage in the textbook and can express more complete information content. Here the analysis is based on the number of reading materials.

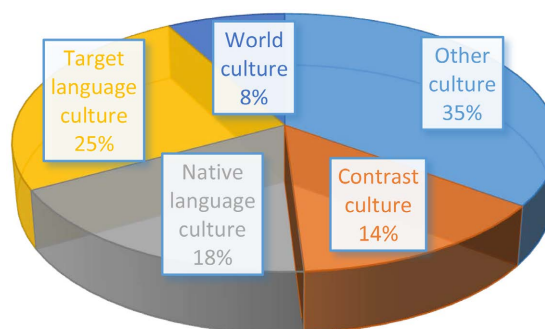
##### 4.1. Analysis of Cultural Content and Its Proportion in Textbooks

Considering these three preparatory units don't have reading materials, the author puts aside these three units. The analysis reveals that there are two reading texts per unit from book4 onwards, so the total number of reading texts for Grade 7 is 21, for Grade 8 is 30 and for Grade 9 is 28. This paper first refers to Zhang *et al.* and Zhang's classification of the cultural content in English textbooks. In this study, target language culture refers to British and American culture; native culture refers to Chinese culture; world culture refers to cultures of other nations and countries in the world other than target language culture and native culture; contrast culture refers to the contrast between two or more cultures; other culture refers to the more general beliefs and scientific and technological knowledge with less obvious national or ethnic backgrounds, such as daily life, natural environment and popular science knowledge. Combining the above statistics and the final appendix, the following conclusions can be drawn here.

From **Figure 1**, we can know the setting of cultural content in English textbooks is relatively reasonable. Target language culture accounts for 25%, native

culture for 18%, the contrast culture for 14% and the world culture for 8%.

According to **Table 1**, there are the most reading materials of native culture and contrast culture in grade 9 with the increase of the grade. This indicates the textbooks are well-organized according to students' psychological development and receptiveness. On the one hand, it helps deepen students' understanding of Chinese culture. On the other hand, it develops students' cultural identification and intercultural communicative skills. But the English textbooks also have shortcomings. Firstly, the cultural content of Grade 8 does not conform to the scientific nature of the textbook compilation. Because native culture accounts for a small proportion, and the target language culture is twice as much as the native culture. This is not helpful for students to learn about Chinese culture and develop their cultural confidence. The setting of Chinese culture should be gradually increased as the age increases, which is in line with the grading criteria of cultural awareness in English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education.



**Figure 1.** The cultural content and its proportion in PEP English textbooks in junior high school.

**Table 1.** Cultural content and its proportions in junior high school.

Grade 7						
Culture	Target language	native culture	world culture	contrast cultures	other culture	Total
Number	5	3	2	3	8	21
Proportion	23.8%	14.3%	9.5%	14.3%	38.1%	100%
Grade 8						
Culture	Target language	native culture	world culture	contrast cultures	other culture	Total
Number	9	4	3	3	11	30
Proportion	30%	13.3%	10%	10%	36.7%	100%
Grade 9						
Culture	Target language	native culture	world culture	contrast cultures	other culture	Total
Number	6	7	1	5	9	28
Proportion	21.4%	25%	3.6%	17.9%	32.1%	100%

Secondly, several reading texts involve native culture in English textbooks are relatively old and outdated. For example, the text in unit3 of book2, in which students take zip-lines across the river to school, deriving from ten years ago and is not in line with the characteristics of the continuous development of culture. The textbook should select some reading materials about Chinese elements, and actively infuse education on patriotism, core socialist values, traditional Chinese virtues and democracy and the legal system.

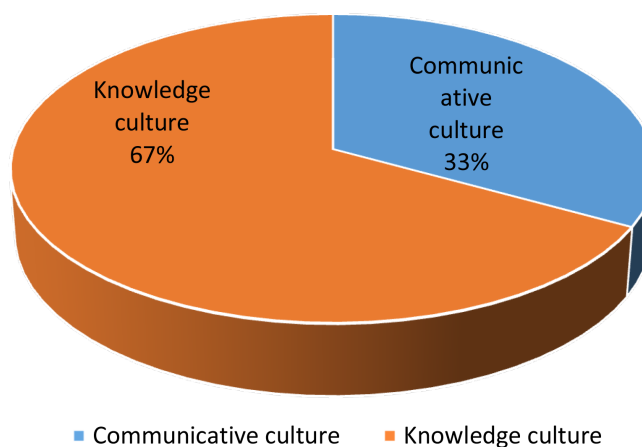
Thirdly, the sources of contrast culture are mostly from British, American and China, which is not good for students to know more about other countries' culture and develop international perspective. Also, the content of contrast culture is relatively shallow, because it is limited to compare some knowledge-based culture without further exploring the formation of a deep value system and thinking mode. So it is not enough to provoke students to think about and discuss culture differences. Moreover, the content of world culture is sparse, especially in Grade 9. English textbooks should be neutral and not reinforce the culture of the target language country (Huang *et al.* 2020: 110-112).

#### 4.2. Analysis of the Content of Native Culture and Its Proportion

According to Zhang's (1990) method, culture can be divided into communicative culture and knowledge culture. The difference between the two is whether the content of the culture directly affects the communication, given the different cultural backgrounds of the two parties. A culture in which communication is affected by misunderstanding due to a lack of knowledge of the cultural background is "communicative culture", while the opposite one is knowledge culture. Taking this classification, an analysis of native content in the textbook will focus on reading part, because passage can pass on more information to students and it's easy for the author to analyze. The results are as follows.

From the analysis of cultural classification and its proportion in **Figure 2**, it is evident that the content of native culture predominantly falls within the realm of knowledge culture. However, there is a deficiency in communicative culture related to behavioral norms, values, and cultural comprehension. Nevertheless, communicative culture holds greater significance in cross-cultural communication. This is because, at times, we do not necessarily need to converse in English; we can employ body language, eye contact, and facial expressions to convey our intentions and emotions. The most formidable obstacle lies in our inability to comprehend their history, social customs, traditions, and the intrinsic aspects of their mindset. Culture forms the foundation of language; only when we understand what foreigners do and how they live can we genuinely grasp and analyze their thought processes.

From **Table 2** below, we can know that B3 has no reading part of Chinese culture, B5 has the most part of Chinese culture. B1 and B2 only have one and two passages respectively to introduce Chinese culture. Therefore, we can see with the grading, students will get more Chinese knowledge.



**Figure 2.** Cultural classification and its proportion in native culture.

**Table 2.** Cultural genres in reading materials.

Unit	Contents	Cultural classification
B1U9	Favorite subjects	Knowledge culture
B2U3	Village life	Knowledge culture
B2U6	Dragon Boat Festival	Communicative culture
B4U1	Bus driver and passengers save an old man	Knowledge culture
B4U6	The Monkey King	Communicative culture
B4U7	Panda	Knowledge culture
B4U10	Chinese countryside	Knowledge culture
B5U2	Chang'e and Hou Yi	Communicative culture
B5U4	Li Wen	Knowledge culture
B5U6	Tea	Knowledge culture
B5U9	Abing and erhu	Communicative culture
B5U14	Graduation ceremony	Knowledge culture

According to the cultural content of The New Curriculum Standards (2022 edition), junior high school students should achieve the requirement of Level 3 to verify his or her English level. From the Chinese cultural content in PEP textbooks, the content of B1U9, “Favorite Subject” is about Yu Mei writing a letter to her friend Jenny and talking about her school life and favorite subject in China. Therefore, it focuses on Chinese teenagers’ lifestyles and studies. In B2U3, “Village Life,” the passage describes children living in a small village going on a rope way to school and uses Liangliang as an example to illustrate children’s innocence and their hope to study.

“Dragon Boat Festival” in B2U6 is about Chinese traditional festivals. By introducing Zhu Hui and his family’s different activities in America and China, students can learn about the differences between the West and East during the

Dragon Boat Festival and some traditional activities on that day. Ultimately, the passage aims to evoke students' feelings of love for our nation. In B4U1, "Bus Driver and Passengers Save an Old Man," the passage belongs to Item 2, which introduces the whole process of helping people and teaches students to be kind and warm-hearted to others in need.

"The Monkey King" in B4U6 is the main character in the Chinese classic "Journey to the West." Through the description of the Monkey King, readers can not only learn his story but also gain valuable life lessons from him. In B4U7, "Panda" is a symbol of China. This passage encourages students to be aware of the importance of protecting the environment and animals while fostering a sense of cultural confidence.

"Hometown Feelings" in B4U10 discusses how Chinese people leave the countryside to search for work in the cities and uses Zhong Wei as an example to illustrate big changes in China. "Chang'e and Hou Yi" in B5U2 is a Chinese fairy tale, which can cultivate students' literacy and cultural appreciation skills.

"He Studies Harder than He Used To" in B5U4 talks about Li Wen's life at school and home, emphasizing the importance of parents being there with their children. "Tea" in B5U6 belongs to Item 9 because Chinese people believe that drinking tea is a good way to stay healthy.

From the analysis above, we can see teenager's life and study are common topics in PEP textbooks in junior high school. Also textbooks pay attention to introduce famous artists and their works, and aims to cultivate students' moral character by learning spirit from famous people. And some reading materials concern with communicative knowledge in English textbooks just introduce declarative knowledge of Chinese culture from the surface, not lead students to reflect deeply on the meaning behind the cultural knowledge [18]. Textbooks could set up more questions for students to think more deeply, also teachers can add more extracurricular knowledge to English teaching, making English lessons various and connotative.

## 5. Concluding

National culture is the spiritual backbone of a nation. Good English textbooks should not only contain comprehensive knowledge, but also convey the correct values and cultural awareness to students. Teachers need to make full use of the reading materials and work with students to uncover the characteristics behind the materials and guide them to seek for deeper emotional experiences and reflections (Tang, 2011) [19].

However, most current research on teaching materials is limited to the static level of textual analysis, and few scholars have studied the use of teaching materials, *i.e.* how teachers make use of them. While textbooks are important, the role of the teacher in teaching is undeniable. The questions about how to make rational and correct use of teaching materials, and how to exert the subjective initiative of teachers deserve further study.



## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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## Appendix

### Cultural content and its concrete representation of Grade 7

Unit	Cultural content	Concrete representation
B1U1	target language culture	First name& Last name
B1U2	other culture	Introducing the family
B1U3	other culture	Lost and Found
B1U4	other culture	Personal habits
B1U5	contrast culture	Soccer vs Ping-pong
B1U6	other culture	Healthy eating for athletes
B1U7	target language culture	Dollar
B1U8	target language culture	Soccer & volleyball
B1U9	native culture	Favorite Subjects in China
B2U1	other culture	Advertisement
B2U2	target language culture	Hamburger& soccer
B2U3	native culture	Village life
B2U4	target language culture	New York
B2U5	world culture	Thailand
B2U6	native culture	Dragon Boat Festival
B2U7	contrast culture	Canada vs Europe
B2U8	other culture	Directions
B2U9	other culture	An interesting job
B2U10	contrast culture	UK vs China
B2U11	other culture	Diary
B2U12	world culture	India

### Cultural content and its concrete representation of Grade 8

Unit	Cultural content	Concrete representation
B3U1	world culture	Malaysia
B3U2	other culture	Free time activities
B3U3	other culture	Different opinions about friends
B3U4	target language culture	American Idol & Americans' Got Talent
B3U5	target language culture	Disney
B3U6	other culture	New Year's resolution
B3U7	contrast culture	Japan vs India
B3U8	target language culture	Thanksgiving

**Continued**

B3U9	other culture	Invitation letters
B3U10	target language culture	London
B4U1	native culture target language culture	Bus driver and passengers save an old man American climber
B4U2	other culture other culture	Students who volunteer Lucy from Animal Helpers
B4U3	other culture other culture	Clean the room Opinions about chores
B4U4	other culture contrast culture	Complain about the family Chinese students' life vs American students' life
B4U5	target language culture target language culture	Alabama Martin Luther King & World Trade Center
B4U6	native culture world culture	The Monkey King Hansel & Gretel
B4U7	other culture native culture	The Qomolangma Panda
B4U8	target language culture target language culture	Robinson Crusoe Country music in Nashville
B4U9	contrast cultures world culture	American museum VS Chinese museum VS Indian museum Singapore
B4U10	other culture native culture	Yard sale Chinese countryside

**Cultural content and its concrete representation of Grade 9**

Unit	Cultural content	Concrete representation
B5U1	target language culture Other culture	English movies Good learners
B5U2	native culture target language culture	Chang' e and Hou Yi Christmas
B5U3	other culture other culture	Fun times park Politeness in foreign countries
B5U4	other culture native culture	Asian pop star Li Wen
B5U5	contrast culture native culture	Chinese making VS American products Chinese tradition
B5U6	native culture contrast culture	Tea NBA vs CBA
B5U7	other culture native culture	Mom knows best Liu Yu and his running

**Continued**


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B5U8	other culture target language culture	Strange happenings Stonehenge
B5U9	contrast culture native culture	Kung Fu Panda vs Spider Man Abing and erhu
B5U10	contrast culture world culture	Colombia vs Switzerland Life in France
B5U11	other culture target language culture	The story of a king Soccer team
B5U12	target language culture target language culture	World Trade Center April Fool's Day
B5U13	other culture contrast culture	Save the sharks The UK vs Hong Kong vs Shanghai
B5U14	other culture native culture	A poem Graduation ceremony

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