

## Cultivation of Chinese EFL Learners' Native Cultural Identity in the New Era

TANG Xia<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Associate Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Huizhou University, Huizhou, Guangdong, China.

\* Corresponding author.

**Supported by** the project "National Cultural Identity Construction in Foreign Language Teaching" (2020GXJK408), funded by the Education Department of Guangdong Province.

Received 12 June 2021; accepted 29 July 2021

Published online 26 August 2021

### Abstract

Identity and culture are important aspects in language teaching and learning. For the majority of Chinese college students, learning a foreign language is compulsory. In the process of learning, western values, ideology, behavior patterns and life styles may exert a subtle influence on their cultural identity. Chinese college students have a dual cultural identity. Despite their high degree of recognition with the western culture, they have absolute confidence in their native culture. The traditional one-way input of target language culture and the absence of native language culture in foreign language teaching should be changed in the new era.

**Key words:** Foreign language; Identity; Western culture; Native culture

Tang, X. (2021). Cultivation of Chinese EFL Learners' Native Cultural Identity in the New Era. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 23(1), 13-17. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/12223>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12223>

### INTRODUCTION

English has been a compulsory course for the majority of Chinese students since primary school. According to a recent survey conducted among 44 first year English majors at Huizhou University, all of them have been learning English for at least 10 years, and 52.27% of them even have been studying it for more than 12 years. For all the college students, learning a foreign language is

compulsory, and English always ranks the first. Therefore, western language and culture has had a great influence on Chinese people. KFC, Mc Donald, Starbucks are quite popular among Chinese youngsters, and Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day are also observed in China. Some college students even know more about Valentine's Day than Qixi Festival (a day for lovers in Chinese tradition). All these lead to a rethink about the teaching and learning of foreign languages in China. What's the impact of foreign culture on Chinese culture? What do we learn English for? What is the image of China in the west? These questions have always plagued the Chinese people, thus creating a kind of collective identity anxiety. Especially in recent years, people's cultural identity anxiety has been amplified through the Internet and mass media.

In the process of English learning, Chinese learners are constantly exposed to western culture, and the values, ideology, behavior pattern and life style contained in English may exert a subtle influence on their cultural identity. The one-way input of target language culture and the absence of native language culture in foreign language teaching have aroused much concern recently. More and more linguists and foreign language teachers attach great importance to the cultural input of the target language in foreign language teaching. In 2016, ideological and political education was put forward by the Ministry of Education in China, attaching great focus on the integration of knowledge-imparting and value-guiding in China's higher education. How a foreign language should be taught and learned remains a critical question in the new era.

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The concept of "cultural identity" was introduced into China by Zhang Yuhe in 1993, a Canadian sociologist, which has exerted a great influence on the study of contemporary Chinese literature and culture. Said (1993)

believes that cultural identity is the essential feature of a nation and the essential feature of a culture with a national imprint in literature and cultural studies. Ting-Toomey (2000) defines cultural identity as the degree to which individuals consider their own culture important. Lustig and Koester (2007) believe that cultural identity is an individual's sense of belonging to a particular culture or nation, which is the key to self-identity. Individuals internalize the beliefs, values, cultural customs, moral standards and social practice patterns of the cultural groups they belong to, making them an important part of self-identity and the basis for selecting the groups they identify with. Feng Tianyu (2001:20) interprets cultural identity as an affirmative judgment of cultural value. It refers to the attitude and way that the cultural group or cultural members recognize that the value utility of the new culture or the different cultural factors within the group meets the standard of traditional cultural value.

Qiu Feng (2006) expresses his "cultural identity anxiety" in an article published in China Newsweek. The opening up after the 1980s and the globalization in the 1990s have brought western values and lifestyles to everyone on a larger scale. What should Chinese people be like? What should China look like? These two questions have always plagued the Chinese people, thus creating a kind of collective identity anxiety. Wang Meng (2006) once put it this way: "Globalization causes cultural anxiety, which means that globalization makes the cultures of some countries and regions feel that there is a danger of being melted and changed. One may lose one's own identity in the first place."

Han Haiyan (2013) discusses that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners may lose their own national cultural identity while forming a kind of cultural identity with foreign culture in the process of foreign language learning, thus resulting in their psychological cultural identity anxiety. They may appreciate or imitate the novelty of the western culture, while at the same time lose their confidence or identity in their own culture, resulting in a sense of anxiety, confusion, worry, inferiority, doubt, rejection, uncertainty.

According to Giles and Johnson (1981), second language learning affects the cultural identity of learners in their first language. Schmitt (2002) points out that foreign language learning will affect the social and cultural behavior and life style of learners. Liu Lu and Gao Yihong (2008) conducted a survey on English learning and self-identity of freshmen and sophomores. The results show that the self-identity of English learners shows an obvious reduction of bilingualism, and the number of years of English learning is positively correlated with learners' identification with western culture.

Bosher (1995) investigated the cultural identity of 100 Hmong undergraduates in American colleges and universities. Her findings suggest that these college students are able to construct a dual cultural identity by

adapting to a foreign culture without abandoning their own cultural or ethnic affiliation. Chen Jing (2004) studied the status quo of cultural identity of Chinese college students with foreign interests through questionnaire and in-depth interview. The survey shows that Chinese college students with foreign interests have an open mind and a high degree of recognition for western culture. Despite this, they still identify with Chinese culture, regard Chinese culture as the "root" and hope for an early revival of Chinese culture. Ren Yuxin's (2008) research shows that Chinese college English learners have a dual cultural identity, that is, the cultural identity of the mother tongue and the cultural identity of the target language, and the change of this identity is related to the development of foreign language proficiency.

## THE STATUS QUO OF CHINESE ENGLISH LEARNERS' CULTURAL IDENTITY

Recently, a survey was conducted among 44 first year English majors at Huizhou University about their cultural identity in their English study. 3 male students and 41 female students, 23 of them have been learning English for more than 12 years. Their reasons for learning English vary from high school to university, as is shown in the following charts.

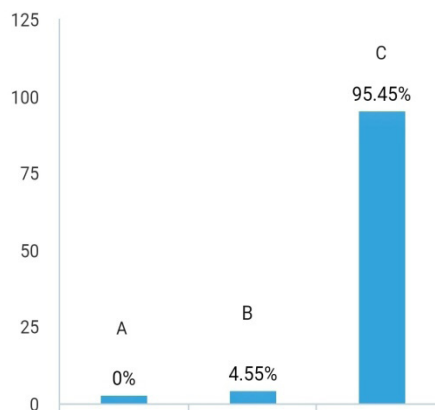


Figure 1  
High school

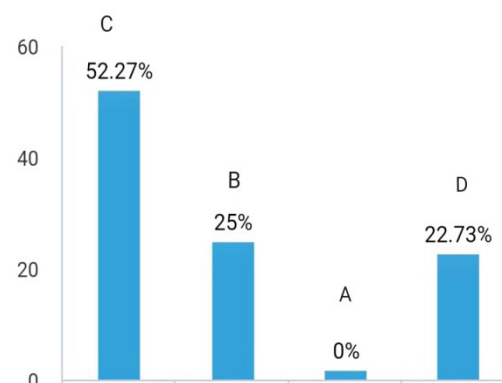


Figure 2  
University

A is for spreading Chinese culture. B is for interest in western culture. C is for exams and further study. D is for learning western culture and spreading Chinese culture.

When they were in high school, 95.45% of the students learned English for exams; only 4.55% expressed their interest in foreign culture. For most high school students, their study is exam-oriented, especially aiming at the national college entrance examination. At university, students learning for exams or further study still accounts for the majority. For English majors, they have to prepare for TEM 4 (Test for English Majors Band 4) and TEM 8; for those non-English majors, they have CET 4 (College English Test Band 4) and CET 6. Besides these national tests and final exams, they still need to prepare for the entrance exams for further study, because English or another foreign language is required in the post-graduate study and doctoral study. However, the percentage decreases almost by 42%, and students' interest in foreign culture increases. Nearly half of them learn English out of interest, and among these students, half express their willingness to spread Chinese culture abroad.

In terms of cultural identity, 91% of them think language learning is related to cultural identity. While learning a foreign language, 80% of them deny native cultural identity anxiety, but 20% of them do have this kind of anxiety. 98% of the students are confident in their native culture, and 82% of them think western culture only has had moderate impact on Chinese culture. 98% of them think Chinese culture and foreign culture are equally important. As to the question whether there is need to cultivate confidence in the native culture among university students, 98% of them offer a positive answer. 84% think Chinese traditional culture is important and pay close attention to it. As to the question of how to cultivate college students' cultural confidence, 75% think it necessary to set up professional training programs, while 25% of them think they only need some kind of reminders instead of professional training.

## THE BACKGROUND OF IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL COURSE CONSTRUCTION IN CHINA

In 2016, at the *National Conference on Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities*, it was pointed out that "moral education should be taken as the central link, ideological and political work should run through the whole process of education and teaching to achieve all-round education". In 2017, the *Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities under the New Situation* was issued in February, pointing out that the ideological and political work in colleges and

universities was a major political task and strategic project, which was related to the successors of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics. In December, the Ministry of Education issued the *Implementation Outline of the Project to Improve the Quality of Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities*, aiming at resolving the imbalanced and inadequate ideological and political work in colleges and universities, and striving to build an integrated education system and open up the "last mile" of education. In October 2018, the Ministry of Education issued a document requiring speeding up the construction of high-level undergraduate education, comprehensively improving the ability of talent training, and accelerating the formation of a high-level personnel training system to cultivate socialist builders and successors with all-round development of morality, intelligence, physique, aesthetics and labor. In 2020, *Guidelines of Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities* put forward the comprehensive advancement of ideological and political course construction, to foster virtue through education, to integrate value shaping, knowledge imparting and ability training, to help students to build correct outlooks of the world, life, and values. In 2021, the Ministry of Education issued the *Notice of the Ministry of Education on the Ideological and Political Course Construction Demonstration Projects* to further implement the *Guidelines*. From 2016 to 2021, China's ideological and political education strategy has been gradually improved and steadily advanced.

In 2019, the Department of Education of Guangdong Province issued the *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Top-class Ideological and Political Course*. In 2020, the *Notice on Deepening the Reform of the Ideological and Political Course Construction* was issued. All colleges and universities in Guangdong Province have responded positively, and ideological and political education of all disciplines is in full swing.

Since June 2019, Huizhou University, where the author teaches, has started the reform of ideological and political education, some demonstration projects have been established, the ideological and political elements have been integrated into all kinds of courses, promoting the organic unity of ideological and political education and knowledge imparting, that is, the mechanism of collaborative education.

From the central government to the local colleges, a pattern of all-around education has been formed, which means that the ideological and political education is no longer limited to the traditional ideological and political courses; it integrates with all the subjects in higher education. Under this background, college English teaching should also keep pace with the times.

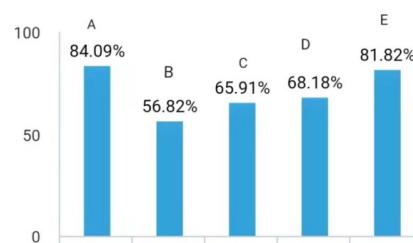
## COUNTERMEASURES TO CULTIVATE CHINESE EFL LEARNERS' NATIVE CULTURAL IDENTITY

Traditionally, English classes focus on foreign language and culture. EFL learners are required to speak and write as well as native speakers, and have an international view of the world. Little attention has been put on Chinese culture through the process of English teaching. According to the survey by Han Haiyan (2013), for most Chinese university students, the input of Chinese culture was mainly through films, TV, the internet, books and Chinese classes, and only 1.8% was through foreign language classes. While for the input of western culture, films, TV and the internet remained the main channels, but foreign language classes accounted for 12.4%. As for English classes while teaching both foreign culture and Chinese culture, 38.10% of the students wanted western culture-centered classes, 28% of them preferred Chinese culture-centered classes.

In the author's survey, though many of them have been studying English for more than 12 years, their main objective is to pass exams, but their interest in western culture has increased. Traditionally, ever since the opening up, Chinese students have been required to learn from the developed countries so as to contribute to their own country, which remains true for this group of students in the survey. In the process of teaching, much attention has been put on the input of foreign culture, while little attention has been put on the output of Chinese culture. That is partly the reason Chinese students' consciousness of spreading Chinese culture abroad is weak either before or after they go to college. But things have changed for the better. Since the national strategy of ideological and political course construction, ideological and political education has been carried out through all levels of college courses, and Chinese students tend to have stronger sense of national identity. After one year's study at Huizhou University, the number of students who want to spread Chinese culture abroad increased from zero to 22.73%. Chinese have learned a lot from the world for a long time, and China has achieved a lot in recent decades, but the outside world still know little about China, most of them see China the way as they did in the past, as it were, 50 years ago. One classmate of the author who now works for the UN PKF once shared a story: one of his team members asked whether it was permitted to take photos on Chinese streets. While listening to the story, the whole class burst into laughter and soon fell into silence. Most of them realize the harsh situation and feel the need to tell contemporary Chinese stories to the outside world.

Though the majority of them are quite confident on their own culture, 20.45% of them have identity anxiety of their native culture. To resolve this kind of anxiety, 2

of them think the best way is to learn Chinese traditional culture well, and 42 of them think they should learn western culture well and spread Chinese culture abroad equally. 75% think it is necessary to set up professional training programs to cultivate college students' cultural confidence. While, the fact is that except for the Chinese majors, most of Chinese college students are offered very few courses related to Chinese culture. As far as the author knows, the English majors, besides the traditional ideological and political courses, may study Chinese language for one semester, Chinese history for another, and that is all. They have had very little input of their own culture in classes. The number of Chinese culture-related courses should be increased, as the spreading of Chinese culture is premised on the mastering of Chinese culture. As to the setting of these courses, the answer of the last question in the survey may offer some references. The following chart is the result of the question: if you have a chance to tell Chinese stories abroad, what kind of stories will you choose?



A is the stories of Chinese traditional culture. B is the stories of "Made in China". C is One Belt One road stories. D is the great achievements in recent decades. E is the image and responsibilities of China as a great power in the world.

As is shown from the chart, students are mostly impressed by the traditional culture in the past and the great power at present. Courses related to these 5 topics can be carried out at colleges and universities so as to cultivate their cultural identity with their own country.

For the teachers, their teaching idea, teaching material and teaching method should be changed. The input of target language and the input of native culture are equally important. According to Priscila Petian Anchieta (2017), identity, culture and difference are important aspects in language teaching and learning environments, and there is need to prepare language teachers not only for their linguistic and pedagogical knowledge construction, but also for their understanding about culture, identity and difference.

For the students, their learning objective and learning method should also change. They do not learn for passing exams; they learn to be a useful citizen. Besides language skills, they also need communications skills. While learning a foreign language, they should pay close attention to their native culture. While learning from



the west, they also shoulder the responsibility to spread Chinese culture abroad. Learning from the outside world and telling Chinese stories to the outside world are equally important.

---

## CONCLUSION

---

Learning English means not only learning the language itself, but also mastering a communication tool. It means that EFL learners may consciously or unconsciously accept the religions, traditional customs, ways of thinking and values contained in the western culture while learning and using English. Therefore, English learners will consciously or unconsciously acquire a new cultural identity. Traditionally, in the process of teaching a foreign language, more emphasis has been put on foreign language and culture and little attention has been put on their native language and culture, resulting in their weak consciousness of spreading Chinese culture abroad. In recent years, the image of China as a great power has been recognized by more and more countries in the world, but not by all, so there is need to tell a new China to the outside world. Under the national strategy of ideological and political course construction in colleges and universities, the teaching and learning of a foreign language should be changed.

Chinese college students are open-minded and have a dual cultural identity. Despite their high degree of recognition with the western culture, they still regard Chinese culture as the “root” and hope for a revival of Chinese traditional culture. As Ren Yuxin (2008) once warned that the higher the foreign language proficiency of learners, the easier they are to identify with the culture of the target language, and the more prominent their cultural identity with the target language will be. This study only investigated a small part of students, so the results may be incomplete or inadequate. Some follow-up surveys will be conducted among these 44 students in the following 3 years at Huizhou University and some non-English majors will be investigated to see how their foreign language proficiency is related to their cultural identity with the target cultural and their native culture. With the carrying out of ideological and political education throughout all levels of colleges and universities, will this kind of

identity anxiety be changed? And to what extent? All these will be discussed in the follow-up studies.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Bosher, S. (1995). Language and cultural identity: A study of among students at the postsecondary level. *TESOL Quarterly*, Brief Reports.
- Chen, J. (2004). *Research on the status quo of cultural identity of Chinese foreign college students: A case study of Shanghai International Studies University*. Fudan University.
- Edward, W.S. (1993). *Representation of the intellectua*. Vitage Books.
- Feng, T. Y. (2001). *Chinese cultural dictionary*. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press.
- Giles, H., & Johnson, P. (1981). *The role of language in ethnic group relations* (J. C. Turner & H. Giles, Eds., pp.199-243). *Intergroup behavior*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Han, H. Y. (2013). *On EFL learners' cultural identity anxiety in the Chinese context*. Shanghai International Studies University.
- Liu, L., & Gao, Y. H. (2008). Changes in English learning motivation and self-identity: A tracking survey of second-year college English majors. *Foreign Languages in China*, (2), 40-45.
- Lustig, M.W. & Koester, J. (2000). The nature of cultural identity. In M. W. Lustig & J. Koester (Eds.), *Among US: Essays on identity, belonging and intercultural competence* (pp.3-8). New York: Longman.
- Priscila P. A. (2017). Culture, identity and difference relationship and the proficiency exam EPPLE. *EntreLinguas*, (1), 95-104.
- Qiu, F. (2006). Identity anxiety of Chinese people: Who we are?. *China Newsweek*, (40), 24-26.
- Ren, Y. X. (2008). An analysis of the cultural identity of Chinese college English learners. *Foreign Language and Literature*, (1), 46-52.
- Schmitt, N. (2002). *An introduction to applied linguistics*. London: Arnold.
- Ting-Toomey, S., Yee-Jung, K., Shapiro, R., Garcia, W., Wright, T., & Oetzel, J. (2000). Ethnic/cultural identity salience and conflict styles in four U.S. Ethnic Groups. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, (24), 47-82.
- Wang, M. (2006). Chinese culture from the perspective of globalization. *Guangming Daily*, 06-01(006).