

# **A Research into College Students' Cultural Confidence and English Teaching in Mainland China**

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**Keywords:** Cultural Confidence; English Teaching; Chinese Culture

**Abstract:** The CPC has been putting great emphasis on the impact of culture in the process of realizing China Dream. In the recent three years, there have been a booming number of researches into culture confidence, most of which are either theoretical ones about the connotation or essence of the term or empirical ones about possible solutions in ideological and political teaching. However, studies on cultural confidence and English teaching are insufficient. Therefore, this paper, by reviewing the articles recently published, aims to find feasible approaches to help students be more confident in Chinese culture.

## **I Introduction**

In recent years, the Chinese government has come to emphasize the importance of culture on socialist construction and development. The CPC confirmed general arrangements for a four-way approach to modernization through economic, political, cultural and social development and further emphasized that culture is an important component and an important objective in economic and social development after the 16th CPC National Congress (Yun, 2011). In President Xi's speech on the 95th anniversary of the CPC, he emphasized the whole nation should strengthen confidence in the path, theory, system and culture. This means confidence in China's national culture is as equally important as confidence in the path, theory and system, which clearly reveals the strategic role of culture in China's development and the significance that culture, as a soft power, plays.

Apparently, there is an urgent need for the whole nation to build confidence in its own culture when faced with such a multi-civilizational world. Therefore, it is of great significance to know the present situation of college students concerning cultural confidence since they will be the main-stream of cross-cultural activities and the backbone of the nation's future development. Meanwhile, due to worldwide usage and influence of English, these young people have to use English to express thoughts and ideas, traditions and customs, histories and achievements in most cross-cultural activities. As a result, what they learn in college and how well they can freely express themselves in English are key factors in building their cultural confidence.

## **II. Connotations of Self-confidence, Cultural Identity and Cultural Confidence**

As for the concept of cultural confidence, a direct and clear definition is still to be found among foreign researchers, although they have made a lot of researches into relative areas such as self-confidence and cultural identity. In China, researchers and scholars have also given their understandings of these topics. In order to have a better understanding of cultural confidence, the following part is presented as a brief introduction to these terms.

### **2.1 Self-confidence**

As a construct from humanistic psychology, self-confidence is probably the most pervasive

aspect of any human behavior. As for its definition, researchers have given their understandings in their studies. Just to name a few, Brown (1994) defines self-confidence as knowledge of oneself and belief in his own capability for an activity. He also points out that no successful cognitive or affective activity can be carried out without some degree of self-confidence. In Social Context Model of L2 learning, self-confidence involves a lack of anxiety and high self-ratings of proficiency when speaking L2 (Clément & Kruidenier, 1985). They propose that in a multicultural setting, self-confidence is the most important determiner of motivation to learn and use the L2.

According to what is mentioned above, people's social activities are closely related to their self-confidence, so without a highly degree of confidence in their culture, they may feel inferior, or even lost when taking part in economic and cultural activities all over the globe.

## **2.2 Cultural identity**

Cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a certain cultural group. Kramsch (1998) said that "cultural identity is bureaucratically or self-ascribed membership in a specific culture" (p.126). It is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is both characteristic of the individual but also of the culturally identical group of members sharing the same cultural identity (Ennaji, 2005).

Based on the definitions presented above, it can be found that cultural identity is multi-dimensional and dynamic since an individual may feel he belongs to this or that cultural group when they are in different situations. With time passing, changes in education or religion may take place and people's identity may accordingly change or reshape. Moreover, the recognition of cultural identity is emotional for it is in large part concerned with one's self-conception and self-perception.

To some degree, one can never have confidence in a culture if he does not identify himself with this culture. Since cultural identity is dynamic and emotional, it is of course possible to find ways to build individuals' cultural confidence.

## **2.3 Cultural Confidence**

In the recent several years, Chinese researchers and scholars (Yun, 2011; Qiu, 2012; Zhang & Qin, 2013; Liu, 2016) have illustrated the term cultural confidence from different perspectives.

For example, Yun (2011) defined cultural confidence as a country, a nation and a political party fully confirming the value of their own culture and having a firm faith in the vitality of their own culture. Qiu (2012) focused on the connotation of cultural awareness and cultural confidence. According to him, cultural confidence is built upon rational thinking. It is neither arrogance over nor blind following of other cultures. Liu (2016) adapted Yun's definition and suggested cultural confidence is cultural subjects' assurance in the values and vitality of their own culture which is formed in a series of cultural activities such as cognition, criticism, reflection, comparison and identification. It is a positive and stable psychological state.

To sum up, cultural confidence is a term closely related to self-confidence and identity. Like self-confidence, it is a psychological state which influences cross-cultural activities; meanwhile, identity with a core culture determines the degree of cultural confidence.

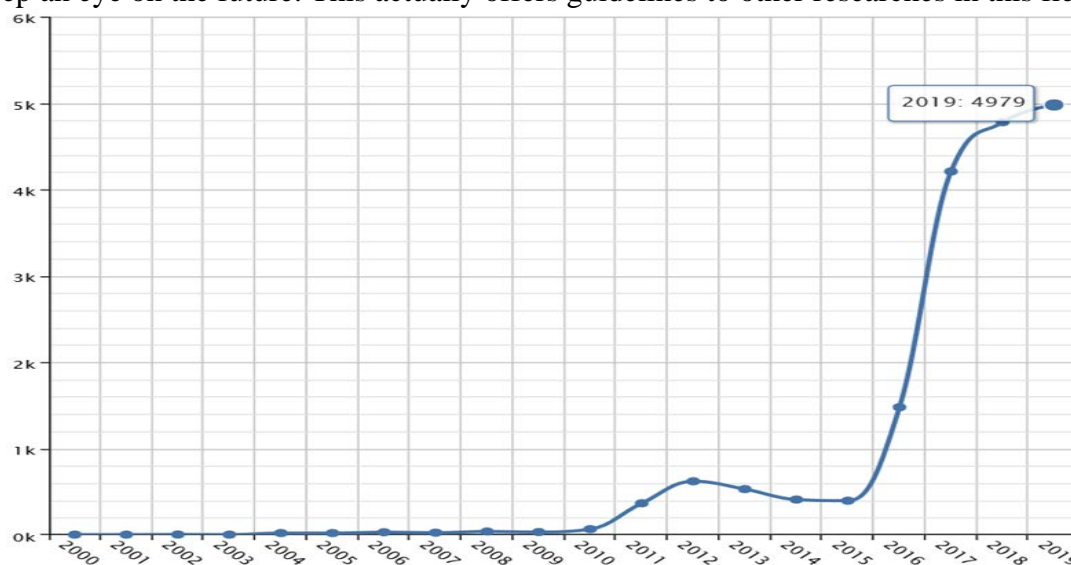
## **III. Researches Overseas and in China**

Researchers abroad have made a large number of studies on cultural identity, and they are of help to shed light on research into cultural confidence and English teaching and learning in China.

In *Culture Identity and Globe Process*, Friedman (1994) compares and analyses how people from different countries and nations reshape their ethnic and cultural identity when communicating with the outside world. He thinks that cultural identity based on ethnics increases with the decrease of hegemonism and imperialism. In his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Huntington (2010) holds that "culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the

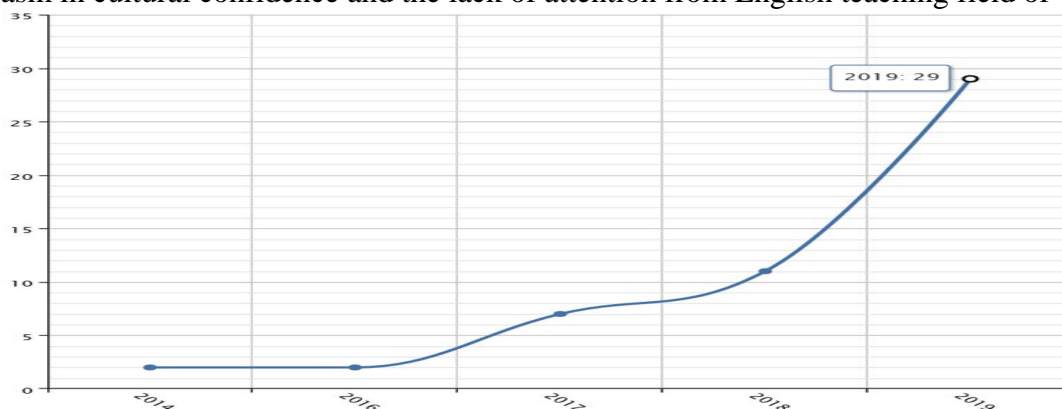
post-Cold War world” (p. 4). Controversial or not, his schema does provide evidence that countries or areas with no identical or similar cultural or religious background are likely to stuck in disputes, conflicts and even wars, so cultural identity is beneficial to the unity of a nation. In other words, as a country with so many ethnic groups, China needs to build up confidence in its own culture so as to promote unity of the ethnic groups and the nation.

In China, studies on cultural confidence have been greatly increasing since 2015(see Figure 1). The later years (2016-2019) witnessed the great enthusiasm of researchers in cultural confidence. Take the year 2019 as an example. According to the searching results from CNKI, there are 4979 published articles with the phrase cultural confidence in their titles. Most of the researchers and scholars have placed their emphasis on the definition, connotation and the strategies to build the nation’s cultural confidence as a whole. Yun (2011) focuses his research on cultural awareness, cultural confidence and cultural strength, and illustrates them as the perspectives to understand culture, the correct attitude toward culture and the best approach to developing culture. When speaking of cultural confidence, he declares the key is to not forget the past, absorb foreign cultures and keep an eye on the future. This actually offers guidelines to other researches in this field.



**Figure 1.** The Number of Published Articles on Cultural Confidence in Mainland China (2000-2019, CNKI)

However, the articles focusing on building college students’ cultural confidence in recent years are mainly related to ideological and political education. As for the relationship between Chinese students’ cultural confidence and College English course, no article was published until 2014(see Figure 2). We still take the year 2019 as an example. Only 29 articles focus on cultivating students’ cultural confidence in English Teaching. Therefore, there is a gap between the researching enthusiasm in cultural confidence and the lack of attention from English teaching field of China.



**Figure 2.** The Number of Published Articles on Cultural Confidence and College English in Mainland China (2014-2019, CNKI)

## IV. Investigation into the Present Situation

### 3.1 Research Design

What is mentioned above has proved the necessity to investigate into the present situation of college students' attitude toward Chinese national culture and the teaching materials and syllables of college English teaching. Therefore, a small-scale research is carried out.

Firstly, a questionnaire adapted from Kong (2014) was made. In order to avoid misunderstanding among students, the questionnaire was given in Chinese. The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part one is about the demographic information of the participants, including their age, gender, and major. Part two collects information about student's attitude toward Chinese culture and their ability in expressing the culture in English.

Then, 200 questionnaire sheets were distributed to students. They are all non-English majors who specialize in Financial Management, Architecture, Chinese Language and Culture, and Industrial Engineering. Finally, 181 questionnaire sheets were collected, with a return rate of 90.5%. More about their demographic information is shown in the table below:

**Table 1.** Description of Participants

Major	Male	Female	Total
Financial Management	16	30	46
Mechanical Engineering	33	8	41
Chinese Language & Culture	5	44	49
Industrial Engineering	37	8	45
Total	89	92	181

Secondly, the 2nd and 3rd edition of the textbook New Horizon College English was compared and analyzed to see if there is any change in choosing topics related to Chinese Culture.

Thirdly, interviews with five teachers were conducted to know about the teaching content and syllables of the College English course. Among them, two are now teaching sophomores and the other three, freshmen.

### 3.2 Findings

#### 3.2.1 From the Perspective of Students

According to the statistics collected from the questionnaire, two characteristics can be found from college students nowadays.

Firstly, the statistical results show that students have a tendency to be more influenced by the western culture than Chinese culture in those aspects closely related to their daily life, such as their attitude toward movies, literatures, holidays, music, and food preferences. To be specific, all students celebrate both Chinese traditional holidays and western holidays. About a half of students care more about western holidays such Christmas, April Fool's Day, Valentine's day and Halloween while the other half think that traditional holidays such as Chung Yeung, Mid-autumn and other traditional Chinese festivals are more important. As for their entertainment, it was found that European and American films account for a larger part of their daily choices than Chinese films, and still some students are blurred in their preferences. For literature reading, most declare that they read both Chinese and western books. What needs mentioning is that in literature reading, students majoring in Chinese Language and Cultures show a great difference that most students have read more Chinese literatures than western ones.

Secondly, Chinese culture are seldom mentioned or weakly emphasized in English teaching and learning. A lot of students have not realized the relationship between English learning and cultural confidence, which may be because they have few chances to learn anything about Chinese

traditional and advanced culture in English course, since quite many say they have not been exposed to English materials about Chinese culture. Besides, their English level and a lack of their teachers' cultural awareness are two important factors which prevent them from getting to know more about China in English.

### **3.2.2 From the Perspective of Textbooks**

In order to further analyze the reasons why the present situation of college English teaching is so gloomy concerning cultural confidence, the 2nd edition and 3rd edition of the text book New Horizon College English (Reading and Writing) are compared, for the 2nd edition has been used for quite a few years and 3rd edition is newly chosen this year.

After analyzing all the texts, it was found that there is only passage about Chinese Culture in all the 80 ones in the four books of the 2nd edition. The only one passages is entitled Rich Meeting his Future Mother in Law, which tells the cultural conflicts between a Chinese mother and her future son-in law, who happens to be an American. Moreover, for all the exercises, nothing is arranged on purpose to train students' ability in expressing topics related to tradition or advanced culture of China.

With the publication of the 3rd edition, we can find two passages about China; one is related to Chinese parenting and the other, speaking Chinese in America, while there are 64 passages in all the four textbooks. What makes it different from the 2nd edition is that in each unit, students are required to do a translation exercise which is about a certain aspect of Chinese culture.

In a word, experts and scholars are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of integrating the ethnic and traditional part of our culture into the English course. Therefore, it is the teachers' duty to find feasible measures to improve students' English language proficiency and build their confidence in Chinese culture.

### **3.2.3 From the Perspective of Teachers**

After the interviews with five teachers in the same university where the questionnaire data were collected, it can be found that most of the teachers simply follow what the textbooks contain in their English teaching and provide nothing more than what the textbooks offer.

Four of the teachers agreed that they simply prepare their courses by following the syllables of the textbooks and did not add cultural factors to their courses, except that they did help their students deal with the translation part, which is generally concerned with a certain aspect of China, such as a tourist spot or a custom. Only one said that she required students to give oral presentations in class from the very first term, and some of her students would choose to talk about their motherland. Not surprisingly, her students major in Chinese Language and Culture.

To briefly summarize, information collected from the interviews reveals that teachers in this university are not fully aware of the role they play in cultivating students' cultural confidence and thus, much should be done to improve the present situation.

## **IV. Conclusion**

### **4.1 Suggestions for English Teaching**

Faced with the situation, some possible approaches should be taken to cultivate Chinese students' cultural confidence in English courses. Firstly, teachers should raise their cultural awareness and try to re-arrange their teaching materials to meet the requirements of the new era. Secondly, for students, it is necessary for them to know more about the traditional culture and the advancement of China to inspire their cultural pride and confidence. Thirdly, English materials about Chinese culture should be recommended to students so that they can make use of these materials to get familiar with correct expressions. By taking those steps, both teachers and students can deepen their understanding of the culture, have firm faith in it and finally become confident enough in cross-cultural activities.

## 4.2 Limitations of the Present Study

This paper is just a small-scale study on the present situation of students' confidence in Chinese culture and possible correlation between cultural confidence and English teaching. Of course, there exist limitations due to the limited academic scope of the author. More preparations should be made on the content of the questionnaire and the sample should include more participants from other universities so that the results can be less characteristic of a single university. Further studies need to be carried out on students' difficulties in expressing culture-related utterances and how the teaching practice can really help to enhance their cultural confidence.

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