

# Some Misunderstandings about Chinese Culture in College English Courses

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## Abstract

The present paper points out four major misunderstandings concerning Chinese culture learning or teaching in college English courses. To remedy those misunderstandings, further explanation and suggestions are provided. Through refutation and addition to those misunderstandings, a better understanding of Chinese culture learning or teaching in college English courses can be reached.

## Keywords

misunderstandings; Chinese culture; college English courses.

## 1. Introduction

It is a mainstream trend to integrate Chinese culture into college English courses in universities across China, which can be seen in the reform of CET 4 which has added Chinese culture translation question type since 2013 and the elective courses on Chinese culture in students' second or third year in college offered by numerous universities. Chinese culture learning or teaching in college English courses has sparked heated discussion among teachers and scholars within the academic circle. However, some misunderstandings or superficial understandings still predominate among some students and teachers as well. Therefore, it is quite essential to point out those misunderstandings in order to remedy them or explore a bit further to clarify the relevant points.

## 2. Body

### 2.1. Misunderstandings about Language Learning and Cultural Exchange

For some students, to learn English is to learn the language itself. For them, language acquisition has nothing to do with culture. In their eyes, language learning is more about the learning of vocabulary and grammar than about culture, so they try every means to enhance their listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation skills in a bid to pass CET 4 and CET 6. Other students make the situation a bit better by realizing the relevance of language and culture or the humanity aspects of language learning. They read English newspapers and literary works, watch American soap operas, celebrate western holidays and appreciate the western thinking patterns and values. In their eyes, to learn English is also to learn western culture. These above phenomena of college students' focusing on language acquisition and western culture are defined by some Chinese scholars as "Chinese culture aphasia".

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, proposes the idea of strengthening our cultural confidence, which strengthens accordingly the cultural attitude and stand that we should hold in language learning or teaching. That is, "cross-cultural communication should be bilateral and on an equal basis. There is no such thing as a superior or inferior culture. There are just the differences between cultures. So while learning foreign culture along the way of learning English, college students should never forget to carry forward excellent Chinese traditional culture." To transmit Chinese culture worldwide, students should develop an interest in Chinese culture so that they will form a strong urge to

share the Chinese stories to people overseas. Then they must cultivate the language ability, especially the bilingual ability to introduce the Chinese culture on a global scale.

## **2.2. Misunderstandings about Opportunities for College Students to Transmit Chinese Culture**

The majority of students believe that it is beyond their duty to transmit Chinese culture worldwide, neither do they think they have the opportunity to do so. But that is not the case in reality. There are so many Chinese culture transmitting opportunities available for college students. First of all, many universities now have recruited international students from a large number of foreign countries who can be the perfect live targets for college students. Besides, students can use various online media such as twitter and face book to post pictures or video clips together with introductory information about Chinese culture. Third, as economic and cultural interaction between countries intensifies, Chinese people have more and more chances to communicate with foreigners face to face. A student may meet a foreign visitor in Beijing who wants to know more about Summer Palace, or the student may one day be on a tour in America and start a conversation with a native speaker who happens to show a liking for Chinese culture.

Actually, in this global village opportunities are everywhere and every citizen can and has the duty to contribute to the “go globally” strategy put forward by our government. Schools can even create opportunities for college students to get them inspired. For example, a certain college contacts the Confucius institute, and the two sides reach an agreement that gives excellent college students a two-month teaching internship opportunity in America. To get the offer, students are really stimulated into great efforts. They create their own teaching atmosphere and learn how to teach in a simulated class. In the competing process, not only do students improve their language ability, but more importantly, they get insights into traditional Chinese culture. So we can get the conclusion that as long as we set proper goals for students and give them the necessary stimulus, students will pour all their energy and passion into the learning of Chinese culture in English. What schools and colleges need to offer is the tempting opportunity to transmit Chinese culture in the real world.

## **2.3. Misunderstandings about the Difficulties in Learning Chinese Culture in English and Teachers' Roles**

Many students hold the mistaken idea that Chinese culture is so easy that they can study the whole stuff all by themselves, while the English equivalent is so difficult that even teachers cannot express the whole stuff freely. There is something in what the students said, but on the whole that is not the case. Chinese civilization has a long history of over 5000 years, and it is characterized by its broadness and profundity. It may be not that difficult if students just give a brief introduction about Chinese culture in English to foreign friends. But as the communication deepens, students may have trouble explaining even in their native tongue in the academic setting. Besides, to better transmit Chinese culture, students are probably required to do something (learn Tai Chi, calligraphy, tea ceremony, etc.) about Chinese culture apart from talking about the theoretical knowledge they have acquired, multiplying the learning and transmitting difficulties.

It is true that even teachers have difficulty talking about Chinese culture freely in English. To properly speak or write out Chinese culture in English, the person involved must bear in mind the English equivalent of the Chinese culture terms in advance. To write something out may be a little easier, as the person involved has time enough to come up with the suitable English expressions, or he or she may consult a dictionary to help him or her out. But when the person has to explain Chinese culture to a foreigner face to face, he or she has no time to think or look up a certain word in a dictionary. In a live conversation situation, the person involved must

pronounce all the Chinese terms correctly, which presents a major headache for most Chinese transmitters.

Despite all the practical obstacles, we cannot deny the important roles that teachers can play in improving students' Chinese culture expressing abilities. Some students' devaluing of teachers' importance urges teachers to make greater efforts in improving their own language abilities and their teaching methods. In this sense, teachers have also become learners. Besides lecturing and talking about Chinese culture in English on an equal footing, teachers should organize various activities for students both in and after class. For example, to introduce Chinese cuisine, teacher Dong from a national-level university cooks Kung-pao chicken himself in advance and takes the dish to class to let his students taste it. He actually takes all the raw materials, seasonings and simple cooking devices to class. He showed the students how to make the dish live in English. The students are so satisfied with this way of teaching that they all stand up and applaud to end the class. They all show their willingness and passion to perform the same special task next time.

#### **2.4. Misunderstandings about the Forms of Chinese Culture Learning or Teaching**

Some students and teachers as well wrongly believe that without Chinese culture courses students just cannot learn Chinese culture. Of course, if such a course is offered, students can learn Chinese culture systematically. In reality, many schools have offered such English courses for students who are interested in Chinese culture and who have passed CET 4. But with the cut of college English teaching hours, it is more significant and practical to integrate Chinese culture teaching into the college English courses so that more students will get involved. But teachers cannot focus on teaching Chinese culture and give up contents in the textbooks. One common way to solve the problem is to pick up something that is both relevant to the text and Chinese culture. Let me give you an example to illustrate the point. One text in the New Horizon College English book series is about heroes. In appearance, the theme seems to have nothing to do with Chinese culture. Teachers may induce students to list several heroes in Chinese history. One teacher asks students if Li shizhen in the Ming Dynasty is a hero, and asks students to justify their views. Then the teacher asks students to define heroism. In this way, the teacher well combines the English text and Chinese culture.

### **3. Conclusion**

The present paper lists some misunderstandings about the learning or teaching of Chinese culture in college English courses. The first misunderstanding is that learning English language has nothing to do with Chinese culture cultivation. To remedy this misunderstanding, teachers should raise students' Chinese culture awareness and cultivate their comprehensive abilities to transmit Chinese culture. The second misunderstanding is that most students tend to deny their duty and opportunities available to transmit Chinese culture worldwide. Teachers should inspire students' national pride in their own traditional culture and cultivate students' broader world views. They should also inform students the opportunities available or create opportunities for them. The third misunderstanding is that students believe in the relative simplicity of Chinese culture and the complexity of mastering the English equivalent. To remedy this misunderstanding, teachers should give students guidelines and train themselves in their spare time. The last misunderstanding is that to learn Chinese culture, a single course should be set up. The truth is, besides setting up single Chinese culture courses, we should also integrate Chinese culture teaching into college English classes. By remedying those four major misunderstandings, students and teachers can be stimulated into further efforts to study Chinese culture in English.

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