

Cultural Content in the 2019 People's Education Press Senior High School English Textbooks: an Analysis of the Reading Texts

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ABSTRACT: Textbooks are the main channel through which senior high students in China meet the cultures of the English-speaking world, and since 2019 they have also become a channel for telling China's own story in English. This paper reports a content analysis of the 35 main reading texts in the seven volumes of the 2019 People's Education Press senior high school English textbook series. Each text was classified according to its dominant cultural anchor: Chinese culture, English-speaking culture, other cultures, universal topics, or a mixture of cultures. Universal topics formed the largest category, with 11 texts (31 percent). English-speaking culture accounted for 9 texts (26 percent), Chinese culture for 8 texts (23 percent), other cultures for 5 texts (14 percent), and mixed texts for 2 (6 percent). The series gives considerable space to Chinese cultural content, a deliberate response to the 2017 curriculum standard, while keeping British and American settings well represented. Regions outside China and the English-speaking world appear only occasionally. The paper discusses what this distribution means for cultural awareness and intercultural competence, and it offers practical suggestions for teachers who use the series.

KEYWORDS: cultural content; textbook analysis; People's Education Press; senior high school English; China; intercultural competence

I. INTRODUCTION

For most students in Chinese senior high schools, the English textbook is the only sustained contact they have with the cultures of the English-speaking world. The classroom is where they first meet an American high school freshman, a London servant in a Mark Twain play, or the long history of the English language. It is also where they first practice describing their own country in English. What the textbook chooses to include therefore matters in a concrete way. It decides which cultures a student meets, how often, and in what light.

The position of culture in Chinese English education changed formally with the 2017 curriculum standard, revised in 2020. The standard lists cultural awareness as one of the four core competencies of the subject, alongside language ability, thinking quality, and learning ability. It asks students to understand the diversity of cultures, to respect cultural differences, and to be able to introduce Chinese culture in English. The textbook series designed under this standard, the People's Education Press senior high school English series first published in 2019, replaced a series from 2004 that had been criticized for the heavy presence of target culture and the thin presence of Chinese content. The new series is used by the largest number of senior high students in the country,

and it carries a heavy expectation: to balance the cultures of English-speaking countries, the cultures of China, and the cultures of the rest of the world.

Whether the new series actually achieves that balance is an empirical question, and it has not been answered for the full set of reading texts. Earlier studies of Chinese textbooks tended to examine one volume or a handful of units, or to compare the old and new series in general terms. This paper analyzes all 35 main reading texts in the seven volumes of the 2019 series, from the three required books to the four selective required books. It asks three questions. How is cultural content distributed across the five categories defined below? How does the distribution vary from book to book? And what does the overall pattern imply for the goals of cultural awareness and intercultural competence?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea that language teaching is also cultural teaching has a long history in applied linguistics. Kramsch (1993) argued that language carries culture and that classrooms should treat the relationship between the two explicitly rather than as an afterthought. Byram (1997) built on this in his model of intercultural communicative competence, which asks learners not only to know facts about other cultures but to interpret, relate, and interact across cultural boundaries. Risager (2007) pushed the discussion further, arguing that the national frame is too narrow and that language education should prepare learners for a transnational world of multiple affiliations. These three positions share a premise: the cultural content that learners meet matters for what they become able to do with the language.

Textbook analysis has developed its own tools for looking at cultural content. The most widely used is Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) three-way distinction among source culture, the learner's own culture, target culture, the culture of English-speaking countries, and international culture, the cultures of the rest of the world. The distinction maps onto Kachru's (1985) three circles of English, in which the inner circle supplies the traditional target cultures and the outer and expanding circles supply the rest. Studies that apply such frameworks to textbooks in various countries have repeatedly found the same imbalance: target culture dominates, source culture is thin, and international culture is nearly absent. Chinese textbook research reported the same pattern for the pre-2019 series. Analyses of the new series are beginning to appear. Du's (2023) master's thesis examined the cultural contents of the 2019 series, Guo (2021) compared the reading texts of the old and new required books, and the evaluation framework developed by Cheng and Sun (2011) has been widely used in Chinese textbook studies. A complete account of the reading texts across all seven volumes, however, has not been published.

This study adopts a version of Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) three categories and adds two more. The first addition is a category for texts that are not anchored in any particular national culture, such as texts about science, technology, health, or the internet. The second is a category for texts that give substantial space to two cultures at once. The five categories are defined in the method section. The additions matter because the 2019 series, like other theme-based textbooks, contains a large number of texts whose topic is a field of activity rather than a nation or a people. A classification that forced such texts into a cultural box would distort the picture.

III. METHOD

3.1 Materials

The materials were the seven volumes of the People's Education Press senior high school English series published between 2019 and 2021 under the 2017 curriculum standard: the three required books and the four selective required books. The unit of analysis was the main reading text of each unit, the passage in the Reading and Thinking section. Each book contains five units, which gives 35 texts in total. Titles and contents were checked against the published books and against publicly available teaching materials. The full list of texts and their classifications appears in Table 3.

3.2 Framework

Each text was read in full and assigned to one of five categories according to its dominant cultural anchor.

Chinese culture. The content is about China, Chinese people, Chinese history, or Chinese ways of life. The Tangshan earthquake and the Chinese writing system are examples.

English-speaking culture. The content is set in, or about, an English-speaking country, normally the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, or Australia. An American high school freshman and the history of the English language in Britain are examples.

Other cultures. The content is about a country or region outside both China and the English-speaking world. Texts about Peru, Egypt, Sweden, and Papua New Guinea fall here, together with the text on the European art tradition.

Universal topics. The content is not anchored in a particular national culture. The topic is a field of activity, such as the internet, health, space exploration, science fiction, or career planning.

Mixed. The text gives substantial space to two cultures at once. Two texts fall here: one about a Chinese volleyball coach and an American basketball player, and one about a Chinese student studying in London.

3.3 Procedure

Classification followed a set of rules. A text set in an English-speaking country but devoted to a general field, such as a virtual choir or smart homes, was treated as a universal topic rather than as English-speaking culture, because its content does not describe the country's culture. A text about a Chinese figure was treated as Chinese culture even when the events took place partly abroad, as in the text about Tu Youyou. A text with two clearly developed cultural settings was placed in the mixed category. The classification was done by the author, with the rules documented so that a second reader can reproduce it. Borderline decisions are flagged in the notes to Table 3. This is a single-coder analysis, and the limits of that design are acknowledged in the discussion.

IV. FINDINGS

Table 1 reports the overall distribution of the 35 texts across the five categories. Universal topics form the largest group with 11 texts, or 31 percent. English-speaking culture follows with 9 texts, or 26 percent. Chinese culture accounts for 8 texts, or 23 percent. Other cultures appear in 5 texts, or 14 percent, and mixed texts in 2, or 6 percent.

Table 1. Cultural categories of the 35 reading texts

Category	n	Percent
Chinese culture	8	23
English-speaking culture	9	26
Other cultures	5	14
Universal topics	11	31
Mixed	2	6
Total	35	100

The English-speaking texts are the most varied in setting. One is set in the United States, one in the history of Britain, one in San Francisco, one in London in a Mark Twain play, one in London during a cholera outbreak, one on a train across Canada, one on a British expedition in Antarctica, one in Australia, and one is about English poems. The Chinese texts are built around Chinese subjects: the Tangshan earthquake, the Chinese writing system, the Tibetan antelope, the doctor Lin Qiaozhi, the scientist Tu Youyou, the agronomist Yuan Longping, Chinese cuisine, and Chinese maritime history. The other-culture texts take the reader to Peru, Egypt, Sweden, the European art tradition, and a village school in Papua New Guinea. The two mixed texts are *Living Legends*, which pairs the Chinese volleyball coach Lang Ping with the American basketball player Michael Jordan, and the story of Xie Lei, a Chinese student in London.

Table 2 shows the distribution book by book. Universal texts appear in six of the seven books, and only the first required book has none. Most of the remaining books contain two. Chinese culture appears in six of the seven books, and only the third selective required book has none. English-speaking culture appears in six of the seven books, and the first selective required book has none. Other cultures are spread thinly, never more than one text per book, and two books have none.

Table 2. Cultural categories by book

Book	Chinese	English-speaking	Other	Universal	Mixed	Total
Required 1	2	1	1	0	1	5
Required 2	1	1	1	2	0	5
Required 3	1	2	0	2	0	5
Selective 1	2	0	1	2	0	5
Selective 2	1	2	0	1	1	5
Selective 3	0	2	1	2	0	5
Selective 4	1	1	1	2	0	5

A few patterns stand out. Universal texts cluster in the fields that the curriculum standard names as themes, such as the internet, health, space, science fiction, and careers, and these texts carry little specific cultural information. Chinese texts are spread so that every year of study touches Chinese culture, which supports the standard's goal of telling China's story in English. English-speaking texts lean heavily on the United Kingdom and the United States. Canada and Australia appear once each, and New Zealand does not appear as a primary setting at all. Latin America appears once, in the text about Peru. Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East do not appear as primary settings in any text.

Seen through Kachru's circles, the series concentrates on the inner circle and on China itself. The outer circle, where English is an established institutional language, is absent from the reading texts. No text presents a sustained view of India, Nigeria, Singapore, or another outer-circle society. For a subject whose stated goal includes understanding cultural diversity and communicating across cultures, this is a noticeable gap.

Table 3 lists all 35 texts with their classifications. Notes mark the decisions that required judgment.

Table 3. Reading texts and cultural classifications

Book	Unit	Text title	Category
Required 1	U1 Teenage Life	The Freshman Challenge	English-speaking
Required 1	U2 Travelling Around	Travel Peru	Other
Required 1	U3 Sports and Fitness	Living Legends	Mixed
Required 1	U4 Natural Disasters	The Night the Earth Didn't Sleep	Chinese
Required 1	U5 Languages Around the World	The Chinese Writing System: Connecting the Past and the Present	Chinese
Required 2	U1 Cultural Heritage	From Problems to Solutions	Other
Required 2	U2 Wildlife Protection	A Day in the Clouds	Chinese

Required 2	U3 The Internet	Stronger Together: How We Have Been Changed by the Internet	Universal
Required 2	U4 History and Traditions	What's in a Name?	English-speaking
Required 2	U5 Music	The Virtual Choir	Universal
Required 3	U1 Festivals and Celebrations	Why Do We Celebrate Festivals?	Universal
Required 3	U2 Morals and Virtues	Mother of Ten Thousand Babies	Chinese
Required 3	U3 Diverse Cultures	A Travel Journal About San Francisco	English-speaking
Required 3	U4 Space Exploration	Space: The Final Frontier	Universal
Required 3	U5 The Value of Money	The Million Pound Bank Note, Act 1, Scene 3	English-speaking
Selective 1	U1 People of Achievement	Tu Youyou Awarded Nobel Prize	Chinese
Selective 1	U2 Looking into the Future	Smart Homes to Make Life Easier	Universal
Selective 1	U3 Fascinating Parks	Sarek National Park—Europe's Hidden Natural Treasure	Other
Selective 1	U4 Body Language	Listening to How Bodies Talk	Universal
Selective 1	U5 Working the Land	A Pioneer for All People	Chinese
Selective 2	U1 Science and Scientists	John Snow Defeats "King Cholera"	English-speaking
Selective 2	U2 Bridging Cultures	"Welcome, Xie Lei!" Business Student Building Bridges	Mixed
Selective 2	U3 Food and Culture	Culture and Cuisine	Chinese
Selective 2	U4 Journey Across a Vast Land	Seeing the True North via Rail: Vancouver and the Heart of Canada	English-speaking
Selective 2	U5 First Aid	First Aid for Burns	Universal
Selective 3	U1 Art	A Short History of Western Painting	Other
Selective 3	U2 Healthy Lifestyle	Habits for a Healthy Lifestyle	Universal

Selective 3	U3 Environmental Protection	Climate Change Requires World Attention	Universal
Selective 3	U4 Adversity and Courage	A Successful Failure	English-speaking
Selective 3	U5 Poems	A Few Simple Forms of English Poems	English-speaking
Selective 4	U1 Science Fiction	Satisfaction Guaranteed	Universal
Selective 4	U2 Iconic Attractions	A Travel Blog	English-speaking
Selective 4	U3 Sea Exploration	Reaching Out Across the Sea	Chinese
Selective 4	U4 Sharing	Volunteering in the Bush	Other
Selective 4	U5 Launching Your Career	Working Out What You Want to Do	Universal

Notes. The Virtual Choir features an American musician but is coded as a universal topic because the text is about a global phenomenon built through the internet. A Short History of Western Painting is coded as other cultures because the art tradition it surveys is European rather than specifically English-speaking. A Successful Failure recounts the British expedition of Ernest Shackleton and is coded as English-speaking. The Travel Blog in Selective 4 Book 2 describes a student's journey in Australia and is coded as English-speaking.

V. DISCUSSION

The most striking feature of the 2019 series is the presence of Chinese culture. Eight texts, or 23 percent, are anchored in China, and the two mixed texts add China as half of their content. Compared with the older series, which textbook research repeatedly criticized for subordinating Chinese content, this is a deliberate and visible change. The standard asked for it. The phrase that circulates in Chinese English teaching, using English to tell China's story, is now built into the textbook itself. A student who finishes the seven books has met, in English, the Tangshan earthquake, the Chinese writing system, the Tibetan antelope, Lin Qiaozhi, Tu Youyou, Yuan Longping, Chinese cuisine, and Chinese maritime history. That is a substantive curriculum in its own right.

The large share of universal texts deserves a closer look. Eleven texts, or 31 percent, are not about a particular culture at all. They deal with the internet, the virtual choir, festivals in general, space exploration, smart homes, body language, first aid, healthy habits, climate change, science fiction, and careers. These are the themes of the standard's topic framework, and they give teachers room to connect the language to students' own lives. At the same time, a text with no cultural anchor does not by itself develop cultural awareness. The cultural work in these units depends almost entirely on the teacher. When teachers are pressed for time, as they often are, the cultural dimension of such units may shrink to a list of new words.

The thin coverage of other cultures is the other side of the balance. Five texts, or 14 percent, take students beyond China and the inner circle, and they are scattered: Peru, Egypt, Sweden, the European art tradition, and Papua New Guinea. Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East do not appear as primary settings. The outer circle of English, the societies where English is an everyday institutional language, is absent. This matters for the stated goals of the subject. If students are to understand cultural diversity and to communicate across cultures in a world where most English speakers live outside the inner circle, the textbooks give them little material for that understanding. The imbalance is not unique to this series. It repeats a pattern found in textbooks around the world, but it is a gap that a series as widely used as this one could close.

Three implications follow for teachers. First, the mixed and universal texts are the easiest places to add cultural content. A lesson on body language can compare greeting customs across cultures that the textbook only names. A lesson on climate change can bring in the experiences of countries that the series never visits. Second,

the Chinese-culture texts can be used as they were intended, as practice in expressing Chinese culture in English, and students can be asked to add their own local examples. Third, teachers who want a more global balance can supplement the series with short texts from outer-circle and other sources. The supplementary materials need not be elaborate. The goal is to widen the cultural map that the textbook provides.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis covers only the main reading texts of each unit. Listening texts, writing models, and the project and video sections may distribute culture differently, and the full picture could differ. The classification was carried out by a single coder, and although the rules are documented, another reader might place some borderline texts differently. The distinction between a universal topic and a cultural one is not always clean, as with the text about the virtual choir, which features an American musician but is treated here as a universal topic. A content analysis describes the textbook, not the classroom. How teachers actually use these texts, and what students take from them, is a separate question that this paper does not answer.

VI. CONCLUSION

The 2019 People's Education Press series is a more balanced textbook than the one it replaced. Chinese culture occupies a real place in the reading texts, and English-speaking culture remains well represented, with the United Kingdom and the United States at the center. Universal topics form the largest category, and they carry the least cultural content. Other cultures appear rarely, and some regions of the world do not appear at all.

The balance the series achieves is therefore partial. It has solved the old problem of a missing Chinese voice, and it has kept the traditional window on the inner circle open. What it has not done is to open that window much further onto the rest of the world. For a subject whose official goal is intercultural competence, the next revision of the textbook might profitably spend some of its universal space on cultures that students currently never meet. In the meantime, the burden falls on teachers, and the analysis here suggests where their effort will count most: in the units that carry no culture of their own, and in supplementing a world map that is still mostly China and the inner circle.

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