

Cultural Education in English education in China: A Cross-Region Comparison of the Reading Comprehension Section in the English College Entrance Exam

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Abstract

Cultural education has become one of the central topics in foreign language education in China and educators in different regions are treating the topic with increasing awareness and conscious efforts no matter in classroom teaching or in test design. This study intends to investigate cultural education in English education in China through a cross-region comparison of the reading comprehension section in the English college entrance exam in Shanghai, Jiangsu and Heilongjiang in recent years. Similarities and differences among these regions are to be analyzed and concluded. Whether the goals of cultural education have been fulfilled is also to be discussed and different approaches to cultural education in three regions are to be identified.

I. Introduction

Reading is an essential prerequisite for success in today's societies. Individuals' interest, attitude and capacity to appropriately access, manage, integrate, evaluate and reflect on written information are central to their full participation of individuals in modern life (OECD & UNESCO, 2003). In the realm of education, reading serves as

a fundamental building block for learning, regardless of the distinction between arts and science – reading stories offers children the opportunity to identify and sort through the details presented in order to determine the outcome and solve problems on their own while developing their analytical skills in the process. In addition, the need to read and comprehend texts in no matter street signs or prescriptions in daily life renders reading an important life skill.

It is therefore inevitable that a country will focus on changes in students' performance in reading comprehension as it seeks to improve its education, both in terms of the mother tongue curriculum and in terms of the foreign language curriculum. However, in addition to the aim of developing students' capability of understanding texts, the cultural values “between the lines” – chosen by educators and experts – should not be overlooked. Reading is a very effective means of exposing students to the culture of a foreign country, especially given that students lack the opportunity to interact with native speakers of the target language or to immerse themselves in such a language environment. More specifically, in an era of globalization where English is the major medium of communication, learning English is an important goal and a must for all non-native speakers of English to understand Western or even world cultures through English.

As one of the countries representing the Confucian cultural circle in East Asia, China possesses a very different culture (or cultural pattern) from the Western culture. Since the reform and opening up of China, the status of English as a foreign language has increased a lot in the basic education stage. The improvement of English language

skills implies the enhancement of students' overall quality and ability to learn, which equips them with an international vision and way of thinking so that they can participate in cross-cultural communication. Through senior secondary education – the last stage of basic education – young people are expected to develop advanced reading skills as well as cultural understanding.

This study explores cultural education in English education through a comparison of the reading comprehension section of the English Gaokao (the college entrance examination in China) in three regions in China: Shanghai, Jiangsu and Heilongjiang. In the instruction of English, students are inevitably exposed to British and American culture, but how different regions of China deal with the British and American culture elements and whether there have been changes in regional approaches are the main interest of the authors of this paper.

II. Literature Review

A. English education and cultural education in high school in China

Today, English has a unique position in this world. As the most widely spoken language in the world, English helps to communicate and exchange information among countries, which in turn helps countries to work together to “build a community of human destiny and promote changes in the global governance system” (Xi, 2017) so that people across the globe can face up to the challenges posed by the pollution, diseases, hegemony and other issues which threat human survival.

In this context, the instruction of English plays a pivotal role. On one hand, the goal of English teaching is to prepare students for future challenges and realities of

life in the transformative and potentially turbulent times, and to improve their competitiveness and sense of achievement in the job market (Chvala, 2020). On the other hand, English teaching can be regarded as crucial to the modernization of education. More specifically, English education serves to improve the overall quality and global awareness of citizens so that they can have a stronger voice in international affairs on behalf of China and contribute to a community of human destiny (Wen, 2014). The past 40 years since the reform and opening up saw China's great progress in English education and international talent training.

B. The design of reading comprehension section in the English college entrance exam

To ensure that students secure ideal grades in Gaokao and be admitted to college, the design of high school curricula in China is aligned to the test design of Gaokao. Therefore, the test design of Gaokao will constitute an appropriate sample for researchers to explore cultural education in high school English education - test items are a direct reflection of the rationales set out in the curriculum standards. *The 2017 High School Curriculum Standards* indicates that the questions in the English college entrance exam should focus on testing students' ability to understand and use English to express their ideas in specific social contexts, which in turn translates into the listening and reading comprehension and the writing and speaking tests. At the same time, students' cultural awareness should also be tested directly or indirectly through the selection of language materials and the design of test items and test formats.

The section of reading comprehension of English Gaokao is generally composed

of four articles with 15 items, which mainly test students' ability to understand English texts. Students are expected to demonstrate their understanding, analysis, interpretation and evaluation of both the content and the structure. *The 2017 Curriculum Standards* in particular suggests that the selection of texts used in the exams should reflect cultural differences in terms of beliefs and values, and the test items should be intended to elicit students' understanding, analysis and handling of the cultural differences. In recent years, it has been observed that the reading comprehension section in Gaokao tends to include more texts that introduce general knowledge of Western culture or involve the transmission of values. These texts often contain vocabulary related to foreign cultures (especially British and American cultures) which some students are not so familiar with and thus constitute a major challenge in terms of cross-cultural understanding (Wang, 2005).

Based on findings from prior studies, this study intends to explore the theme of cultural education in high school English education in China through looking into the following research questions:

- 1) What are the similarities in terms of the design of the reading comprehension section in the English college entrance exam among the three chosen regions in China?
- 2) What are the differences in terms of the design of the reading comprehension section in the English college entrance exam among the three chosen regions in China?
- 3) Does the test design in different regions achieve the goals set out by the

curriculum standards in terms of cultural education? And in what way does it manage to do so?

III. Thematic Narratives

A. Shanghai

Table 3.1 - The composition of reading comprehension in the college entrance exam in the recent 5 years in the case of Shanghai

	A	B	C	D
JAN 2017	An article on <u>the sixth sense</u> (excerpt from a coursebook)	An article on <u>the influence of the physical context of a classroom on students</u> (adapted from a coursebook)	An online <u>advertisement</u> (original)	An article on <u>helicopter parenting</u> from a website
JUN 2017	An essay on <u>the movie industry and writing</u> from <i>the HuffPost</i>	An <u>airline ticket</u> and its confirmation	An essay on <u>ageing parents</u> from <i>the Guardian</i>	An essay on <u>vegetarianism</u> from the BBC
JAN 2018	An article on <u>equality</u> from the HuffPost website	An article on the <u>history</u> of the national park from <i>the National Geographic</i>	An article on <u>traffic rules and culture</u> from the CNN	An article on <u>data</u> from <i>the Guardian</i>
JUN 2018	An article on <u>team management theories</u> from a website	A book excerpt on <u>history</u>	An article on the <u>development of education</u> from a website	An article on <u>mathematics and reading</u> from a website
JAN 2019	An article on <u>tourism and urban development</u> from <i>the Guardians</i>	A <u>notice</u> of an assessment <u>schedule</u>	A news article on <u>clean energy</u> from <i>the Financial Times</i>	An introduction of a new <u>material</u> (original)
JUN 2019	An essay on <u>the relationship between individuals' self-value and their jobs</u> from <i>the New</i>	An <u>introduction</u> of <u>geography</u> courses from a website	An article on <u>global illumination and environmental protection</u> from <i>Scientific American</i>	An article on <u>research on cognition</u> from the website of <i>the Seattle Times</i>

	<i>Yorker</i>			
JAN 2020	An essay on “ <u>clean eating</u> ” from <i>the Washington Post</i>	An article on <u>psychology</u> from a website	An introduction of apps for <u>climate activists</u> (original)	An article on parks and <u>environmental protection</u> from <i>the Guardian</i>
JUN 2020	An article on <u>fitness training</u> from a website	An article on the <u>movie industry</u> from the Newsday website	An article on tips for <u>budget travelers</u> from a website	An essay on <u>novel writing</u> from <i>the Time</i>

(The two exam papers in 2021 cannot be accessed and therefore are not included in the analysis.)

The fact that students in Shanghai can take the English test twice since 2017 (with the higher score counted for their overall Gaokao grades) renders the sample here is twice the size of the sample of other regions. Besides, Shanghai has always adopted its own version of English college entrance exam, which thus yields more potential for analysis.

From 2017 to 2020, the design of the reading comprehension section in college entrance exam in Shanghai can be seen as the efforts of the local Education Commission to reflect the curriculum standards published by the Ministry of Education, which in its latest version prioritizes the overall development of the younger generation.

From the table it is self-evident that the diversity of genres and the cross-disciplinary nature of the reading comprehension section has remained consistent throughout the years yet the focus on public concerns and current affairs in society has been increasingly highlighted and reflected through the choice of topics. The narratives generated by the articles roughly reveal the juxtaposition of two significant tendencies, or themes – students are encouraged to both look inward and look

outward. Through articles examining individuals' relationship with nature, society and themselves, the design of the exam is shifting in such a direction that it is increasingly intended to test students' cognitive and linguistic capacities and critical thinking skills. What's more, students' sense of civic duty and social responsibility as well as humanistic values and morals are also taken into account.

From my perspective, it is worth noting that the majority of the sources of the articles selected in the exams are mainstream foreign newspapers, magazines and news websites, which can be regarded as highly rational and, in the meantime, reflecting inclusion, diversity and common humanistic concerns. The selection of a variety of topics suggests that in terms of culture, English education in Shanghai does not try to lead students to identify with one specific local or domestic priority; instead, topics such as environmental protection, social equality and self-identification are, to a large extent, themes whose importance transcends geographical boundaries and temporal limits. In addition, English education in Shanghai does not exclude or deny the value of various aspects of daily life or our near surroundings – topics such as fitness, travelling and entertainment can also be found in the reading comprehension section. The balance and harmony between the macro narratives and the micro narratives has truly impressed me and, as a student who has been subconsciously absorbing such values in English learning in my high school years, I have developed a relatively humanistic value system and become an advocate for diversity. Besides, such an approach to culture in language teaching serves to kindle and maintain students' passion for language learning and their learning motivation. Students are to

benefit from the multiplicity of perspectives afforded by a humanistic value system no matter they are aware of it or not. For me personally, part of the reason that I have chosen my undergraduate major can be attributed to this – I aspire to seek ways to promote what I have gained from an inclusive, humanistic approach to culture and provide humanistic language education for future generations. Given my own case, it can also be concluded that an inclusive and humanistic approach to culture also contributes to sustainability in a broader sense.

B. Jiangsu

Table 3.2 - The composition of reading comprehension in the college entrance exam in the recent 5 years in the case of Jiangsu¹

	A	B	C	D
2017	The introduction of a <u>(Western) history</u> book (5)	Sciences “rule the roost” A research conducted in <u>Australia</u> (4)	Politics and Economy Ex: Internet companies such as <u>Google</u> (3)	A <u>global issue</u> : new approaches to mitigating global warming (1)
2018	The notice of the <u>Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York</u> (9)	How to make a <u>(western) restaurant</u> more popular Ex: lighting, <u>classical music</u> (7)	Farmers’ economic development Ex: NYFC of the <u>U.S.</u> (3)	Influences of social media on children (from every country) (1)
2019	Explanatory essay on <u>tourist attractions</u> (9)	The volcanic history of <u>Yellowstone National Park in the U.S.</u> (2)	Argumentative essay on the adverse effects of an over-obsession with information technology on the state and individuals (1) & (4)	A narrative essay about a pianist who helps an old man with Alzheimer to record his music (human interaction) (1)
2020	Some important dates in <u>China’s fighting Covid-19</u> in 2020 (10)	The history of <u>phone boxes</u> (2)	Health: the relation between eating and doing sports (4)	A narrative essay: Through an <u>experience in Amazon</u> and that of collecting newspaper articles, the author realizes that <u>the</u>

¹ *The English Curriculum Standards for General High School* lists ten categories of cultural topics among the cultural awareness objectives: (1) personal, family and social interactions; (2) history and geography of English-speaking countries; (3) education and economy of English-speaking countries; (4) science and technology; (5) literature and art; (6) traditional customs; (7) customs and conventions; (8) festivals; (9) daily life of English-speaking countries; (10) daily life of Chinese people.

				<u>world is big and wonderful, where there're something we know and we don't.</u> (1) & (6)
2021	An introduction of several inexpensive, safe and comfortable <u>hotels in Rome</u> (9)	A Narrative essay about Robert Titterton, who does page-turning work for piano players (1)	An expository essay to protect the waterfowl <u>in the U.S. by selling Federal Duck Stamps</u> to hunters after the influx of <u>immigrants</u> (2)	The definition of emotional intelligence (EQ) and relative researches (4)

Unlike other provinces which use the same version of the college entrance exam, Jiangsu, a province with top educational quality and resources in China, has adopted its own version from 2008 to 2020, which is also called a pioneer of the new reform of college entrance exam in China (Yuan & Liu, 2021). In the reading comprehension section in English, the total reading quantity did not present a decline tendency, and the passage topics were various, which covered the topics suggested by Standards, focusing on Human and Society. Plus, the reading passages tended to be more difficult and most of them were chosen from foreign magazines and books like *The Economist*, *Time* (Lu, 2018). Since 2021, Jiangsu and six other provinces - Shandong, Guangdong, Fujian, Hunan, Hubei and Hebei - together adopt the new version I of national college entrance exam paper. This reform has rendered reading comprehension section shorter and less difficult, but the topic of each text still focuses on British and American culture.

From 2017 to 2021, the articles are almost consistent in the style of selection, and the text of these articles is equipped with a strong sense of modern life characteristics. From the table, it is self-evident that nine topics listed in the standards are include (except the eighth one - festivals), which truly reflects a concept – that language is the

carrier of culture. It is also obvious that the reading comprehension section tends to realize the enhancement of students' overall quality and ability to learn, which equips them with an international vision and way of thinking.

Meanwhile, we can also find that these topics are close to students' daily life. Take the relationship between social media and the stress faced by teenagers described in Part D in 2018 for example. The history and geography of English-speaking countries are also well represented in the reading comprehension section of the Jiangsu college entrance exam in the recent five years. For instance, some cost-effective hotels in Rome are introduced in Part A of the version in 2021. And in Part A and B in 2019, the culture that tourists can enjoy when visiting Buxton and the distinctiveness of volcanic history of Yellowstone Park – which represent the historical and geographical background of English-speaking countries – are helpful in guiding students to take initiative to understand foreign cultures, enhance their interest in learning English, thus contributing to improving students' cross-cultural communication skills and confidence in Chinese culture.

What's more, the knowledge of science and technology has become a central topic, given that relevant articles are included in 2017, 2019, 2020 and 2021 tests. For example, Part D in 2017 is about new approaches to combating global warming, which reminds the examinees that with the development of the science and technology, people should stay sensitive to such clichéd issues (such as environmental protection) and try to be a qualified global citizen. Part C in 2019 is about negative impacts of the rapid development of information technology on people. In all, the

introduction of scientific elements to the reading section scientific knowledge in English reading comprehension can help shift students' as well as teachers' attention to latest development in the field.

C. Heilongjiang

Table 3.3 - The composition of reading comprehension in the college entrance exam in the recent 5 years in the case of Heilongjiang

	A	B	C	D	Task Reading
2017	Information about theatres around the world showing Shakespeare's plays	The friendship between two actors	A new type of motor vehicle	Leafy plants release a chemical substance called VOC when attacked	About how to deal with life disturbance in the work and giving some advice
	<i>The selected materials are mainly practical essays, narrative essays and expository essays, covering all aspects of examinees' life methods, including scientific and technological innovation, interpersonal communication, human and nature, etc.</i>				
2018	Searching for information about extracurricular activities	The nutritional value of fruits and how to enjoy them	A survey of teenagers' reading	The importance of small talk	The Benefits of fitness
	<i>Expository text accounts for the largest proportion, followed by practical and argumentative writing, and there is no narrative. Discourses are selected from students' daily life, including domestic and foreign cultural elements.</i>				<i>Embodying the theme of "man and society" and "healthy life"</i>
2019	An introduction of several best-selling books.	The author's experience encouraging others to volunteer	An explanation of the social phenomenon that Americans eat alone.	The introduction of a research project that NASA works with high schools to study methods of removing microorganisms from space station's surface	Discussing the dialectical relationship between motivation and goal and how to stimulate motivation and set up feasible goals
	<i>To make students pay attention to reading books and expand their</i>	<i>To advocate the mainstream values of the society, embodies the</i>	<i>The article is from the original English works, conveying western</i>	<i>A foreign paper, involving the field of scientific research</i>	<i>Embodying the theme of "man and himself" in the new</i>

	<i>horizons.</i>	<i>function of education to “to foster virtue through education”.</i>	<i>culture.</i>		<i>curriculum standard</i>
2020	An introduction of cultural attractions in a Lake District of England	The role of jigsaw puzzles in developing children’s intelligence	Nutria fur costumes become fashionable	The impact of reading on life	An introduction of emoticons that are widely used in the workplace
	<i>Cultural heritage and cross-cultural communication</i>	<i>Science and technology development</i>	<i>Human beings and animals, animal protection</i>	<i>Life and learning</i>	<i>Embodying the convenience brought by information technology and advocating harmonious interpersonal relationship</i>
2021	The Biggest Stadiums in the World	The phenomenon and reason for more than half of Australian homes still paying for a landline	Artist Benjamin Von Wong builds massive sculptures out of plastic garbage	Exploring the influence of background sound in work environment on creativity	How to be a more interesting person at dinner parties
	<i>Increasing students’ humanistic knowledge</i>	<i>Introducing the social phenomenon of an English speaking country and understanding the cultural background</i>	<i>Integration of environmental protection and artistic display, epistemological issues for art educators in the English-speaking world</i>	<i>Inspiring students to think about the methods of scientific inquiry and the close connection between science and life</i>	<i>Developing harmonious interpersonal relationships</i>

It can be concluded that the topic selection of the reading comprehension part emphasizes diversity and tends to revolve around the themes of “man and society”, “man and nature”, and “man and himself”. Specific topics involve history, society, culture, science, and environmental protection, which are in alignment with the National English Curriculum Standards and reflect the features of the era. At the same

time, the topic selection indicates that the college entrance examination adheres to the principles of moral education and aims to evaluate students in terms of overall development. Table 3.4 lists some of the specific topics:

Table 3.4 - Part of the specific topics selected in the reading comprehension section in the college entrance exam in recent years in Heilongjiang

Thematic contexts	Specific contents of the thematic context
Man and Society	Cultural customs, traditional festivals and social phenomena of different countries/regions/nationalities
	Social progress and human civilization, material and intangible cultural heritage
	Literature, art, sports activities
	Cross-cultural communication, interpersonal communication, tolerance and cooperation
	Development of science and technology, innovation of information technology
	Social services
Man and Nature	Natural ecology, environmental protection and sustainable development
	Earth and space exploration
Man and Himself	Knowing yourself and improving yourself
	Establishing correct values and cultivating excellent virtues
	Good at learning, lifelong learning
	A healthy life

The reading comprehension section of the English college entrance exam in Heilongjiang typically demonstrates three characteristics in the field of cultural education. To begin with, it encourages students to explore different cultures and accumulate relevant knowledge through different contexts. The National English Test II test model covers reading texts that focus on different topics, among which the theme of “man and society” usually accounts for the largest proportion. More specifically, topics include social phenomena, conventions and customs, history and geography and science and technology. It helps students to enrich their cultural

knowledge by introducing the cultural background of English-speaking countries and other countries. Take the reading comprehension section in the 2021 test for example. The author uses data and personal experiences to explain why many Australian households retain landlines. Such design serves to stimulate students' interest in learning English and offer contexts essential to their acquisition of both linguistic and cultural knowledge.

In addition, the design of reading comprehension section highlights cultural differences and aspires to enhance students' cultural confidence. In topic selection, the National English Test II test model also pays extra attention to involving multiple English-speaking countries other than the major ones. It exposes examinees to various contexts of English usage so as to rid them of monotony in both expression and culture. Particularly in the Reading A, the article will introduce the cultural background of many countries/regions, which helps cultivate students' global awareness. It is worth noting that in recent years, the National English Test II test model has consciously added included Chinese cultural elements in the test design in that students are to identify with their cultural identity and boost their cultural confidence.

Most importantly, the reading comprehension section aims to help students develop an appropriate outlook on life and the world. Articles selected in the exam generally involve the ones that convey authors' views on the world and life. For example, Section B in the 2019 test uses the author's personal experiences to illustrate the significance of volunteering and communicate mainstream socialist values to

students, which is in line with the goal of college entrance examination. Also, the task-based reading section usually focuses on interpersonal communication skills, reflecting the intention of the test design to promote healthy values.

IV. Discussion

A. Similarities in the design of the reading comprehension section in Shanghai, Jiangsu and Heilongjiang

After the latest reform of the national curriculum standards, the reading comprehension section in all three chosen regions generally demonstrate a focus on language in use. Students are expected to apply the language in real target situations and their abilities are tested through articles selected from mainstream foreign newspapers, magazines and news websites.

In addition, as for the composition and themes, the reading section in all the three regions consists of four articles, with 15 items unevenly assigned to them. Students generally find articles dealing with science and technology more challenging because they are not familiar with the field in the first place, not to mention when the content is not presented in their native tongue. Besides, articles involve cultural themes are most often found to be dealing with English and American culture, with much fewer touching on the culture of other non-English speaking countries. Also, three regions all strive to keep up with current affairs, which is evidenced by the introduction of specific topics aligned with fiercely debated issues each year in the test.

B. Differences in the design of the reading comprehension section in Shanghai, Jiangsu and Heilongjiang

The three chosen regions first differ significantly in the mastery level expected from the students reflected by the tests. Teachers and students in China seem to have reached a consensus on the reading comprehension section of English college entrance exam in Shanghai being the most challenging model. Without the same regular exposure to English as students in Hong Kong, students in Shanghai nonetheless have to demonstrate a comparable level of mastery of the language in the test. Compared with students in Shanghai, students in Jiangsu face a more friendly level of challenge and in Heilongjiang, still less is expected from students no matter in the whole English test or in terms of abilities and skills required by English reading comprehension.

Furthermore, in terms of topic selection, the reading comprehension section in English college entrance exam in Shanghai clearly demonstrates a ‘decentralized’ tendency in its design. In general, it represents the highest level of diversity and inclusion in terms of topic selection across China. As has been observed in prior analysis, articles selected in Shanghai does not favor those seemingly more significant themes over the ones that appear comparatively trivial. Nor does the design substitute the non-academic ones with the academic ones. Cultural education has been relatively maturely incorporated into English education as a whole and is delivered, no matter in teaching or in testing, more as a means than as an end – cultural education is treated as one fundamental channel afforded by a developed education model that enables

and empowers individuals to live their lives to the fullest. In the case of Jiangsu, the topic selection of the reading comprehension section of English college entrance exam in Jiangsu mainly reflects two features of cultural education in English education in Jiangsu. First, the articles tend to share a focus on the interaction between individuals, which usually takes the form of the author's insights on life presented at the end of the articles. Such an arrangement suggests that the test aims to tacitly influence students' cultural awareness and understanding and better incorporate cultural education into the broader agenda of English education. Moreover, the test design of the reading section in Jiangsu reflects the efforts to promote knowledge of science and technology among students because many students, especially those who opt to be tested in liberal arts, have better grades in English than in other science subjects. The introduction of scientific elements to the reading section scientific knowledge in English reading comprehension can help shift students' as well as teachers' attention to science subjects. And finally, in the case of Heilongjiang, the topic selection in the reading section reflects a relatively high level of diversity, yet a strong sense of practicality can be observed from the themes of the articles selected. Particularly in one section, the articles selected each year seem to share an emphasis on studies, interpersonal communication, personal health and lifelong learning, which can also be regarded as explicit efforts in helping students to achieve overall development goals set out in the national curriculum standards.

V. Conclusion

Through the cross-region comparison of the design of the reading comprehension

section in the English college entrance exam, the conclusions drawn can be expected to answer the research questions outlined in prior sections. Shanghai, Jiangsu and Heilongjiang have more in common in the design of the reading comprehension section, which is partly facilitated by the latest reform of the national curriculum standards. The diversity of the topics selected reflects the importance each region attribute to cultural education in English education. Also, students in all three regions are challenged to yield the best of their performance in the test. The differences among the three regions are two-fold. On the one hand, if placed on a common scale, students are challenged to different degrees in the three regions. On the other hand, the degree to which the three regions incorporate cultural education to English education differ, indicating distinct approaches to cultural education in foreign language education adopted respectively by the three regions.

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