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The Diachronic Evolution of the Distribution of Chinese and Western Cultural Content in High School English Textbooks: Based on the "Reading" Section of the Compulsory Textbooks of the People's Education Press Edition

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Abstract: With the deepening of globalization and the increasing emphasis on national cultural identity in educational discourse, the arrangement of cultural content in English textbooks has received increasing attention. This paper takes the People's Education Press (PEP) high school English compulsory textbooks as the research object, and uses the "Framework for Analyzing Cultural Representations in Foreign Language Textbooks" to conduct a diachronic comparative analysis of the Chinese and Western cultural content in the "Reading" sections of the 2004 and 2019 editions. The study finds that in the new edition, the proportion of learners' native culture has significantly increased, while the proportion of target language country culture has decreased. The proportion of Chinese and Western cultural comparison content has also noticeably increased. In terms of thematic context, both editions prioritize the "Human and Society" theme. The findings of this study provide theoretical support and practical insights for English textbook compilation and teaching practice.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence; diachronic evolution; Chinese and Western cultural content; high school English textbooks

1. Introduction

As globalization continues to deepen and intercultural communication becomes increasingly frequent, English, as a global lingua franca, plays an increasingly important role in cross-cultural communication. Senior high school English education bears the responsibility of cultivating students' intercultural communicative competence and cultural awareness. As the core resource for high school English teaching, the content selection and organization of textbooks directly influence the development of students' cultural awareness and intercultural capabilities.

In recent years, China's educational policy has elevated cultural confidence to the level of national strategy. The General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, revised in 2020) highlights the importance of cultural awareness and stresses the role of English learning in helping students understand both Chinese and foreign cultures, develop a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and cultivate intercultural perspectives and behaviors [1,2].

Against this backdrop, the proportion and presentation of cultural content in high school English textbooks have become a focal point of academic inquiry. The People's Education Press (PEP) English textbooks, as one of the widely used series in China, reflect shifts in educational philosophy and policy direction through their content changes. The

diachronic evolution of cultural content between the 2004 and 2019 editions reveals adjustments in educational goals. Studying this evolution is of great significance for understanding textbook development trends, guiding teaching practices, and enhancing students' intercultural communicative competence. While existing research often focuses on the static analysis of cultural content in textbooks, systematic studies of their diachronic transformation remain insufficient. This study aims to analyze and compare the distribution of Chinese and Western cultural content in the "Reading" sections of the 2004 and 2019 PEP high school English textbooks, to explore their diachronic evolution and underlying educational philosophies, thereby providing theoretical support for textbook development and practical guidance for classroom instruction, ultimately promoting students' intercultural communicative competence.

2. Literature Review

Intercultural communicative competence has become one of the core objectives of senior high school English education. In terms of its connotation and constituent dimensions, Gu believes that intercultural competence involves not only understanding the culture of the target language but also focusing on one's native culture [3]. Chen further points out that this competence includes not only linguistic ability but also cultural awareness and intercultural communication strategies [4]. Derakhshan also notes that although cultural content in Iranian EFL textbooks is abundant, it lacks deep engagement with intercultural competence, often presented merely through indexed images and texts without substantial cultural analysis [5]. Regarding the pathways for cultivating intercultural communicative competence, Yang suggests that English teaching should enhance learners' intercultural sensitivity, tolerance, and flexibility in handling cultural differences [6]. Peng believes that textbook cultural content should align with learners' intercultural concepts and behavioral practices [7]. Canale argues that textbooks often lack systematic and in-depth training in intercultural competence, and there should be greater focus on cultural diversity and complexity [8]. Moreover, the theoretical link between intercultural competence and textbook research is becoming increasingly close. Yang emphasizes that textbooks should embody a close integration of linguistic and cultural elements [6].

The presentation and evolution of cultural content in textbooks significantly affect the formation of students' intercultural abilities. In recent years, numerous scholars have explored the structure of textbook cultural content, modes of presentation, and practical teaching applications to offer both theoretical and practical support for curriculum design. In terms of content structure, studies reveal that cultural representations in textbooks tend to be imbalanced. Silvia found that Chinese culture is underrepresented in textbook narratives [9]. Similarly, Myers highlighted the unequal distribution of cultural content in textbooks [10]. Davidson and Liu examined cultural representation in Japanese elementary school English textbooks and noted a gradual shift from a purely Japanese cultural focus toward more international elements, though the shift remains limited [11]. Liu notes that the new textbooks strike a balance between being rooted in Chinese traditions and engaging with global cultures, thereby laying the groundwork for developing intercultural communication skills [12]. In terms of presentation, while textbooks use various methods to convey cultural content, there is still room for improvement. Zhang and Lu emphasize the diversity of approaches in presenting traditional cultural material [13]. Derakhshan observes that textbooks mainly present cultural content through the indexing of images and texts, lacking interpretative depth [5]. At the pedagogical level, Gong suggests that English instruction should incorporate Chinese cultural elements to enrich learning content and enhance relevance for learners [14]. Xu highlights the importance of comparing Chinese cultural knowledge with other cultures to foster intercultural critical thinking [15]. Lee and Li emphasize that teachers can cultivate students' intercultural communicative competence and cultural awareness based on instructional objectives and learner needs [16]. Furthermore, Chen stresses that intercultural competence must be developed

through both textbooks and learning activities [4]. Wang Qiang advises teachers to guide students in appreciating and comparing cultural differences to facilitate intercultural communication [17].

Thus, while current studies examine the current state and presentation of cultural content in textbooks, there remains a lack of systematic diachronic research on the proportion of Chinese and Western cultural content in the 2004 and 2019 editions of the PEP high school English compulsory textbooks. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the diachronic evolution of Chinese and Western cultural content in the "Reading" sections of the two editions, guided by the following research questions:

1) How has the distribution of Chinese and Western cultural content (i.e., learners' native culture and target language culture) evolved in the "Reading" sections of the two editions of PEP's senior high school English compulsory textbooks?
2) What changes in educational philosophies and cultural values does this evolution reflect?
3) What implications does it hold for high school English teaching practice?

3. Research Design

This study adopts the "Framework for Analyzing Cultural Representations in Foreign Language Textbooks", as it allows for systematic classification and accurate analysis of cultural content in textbooks, providing solid theoretical support for textbook development and instructional practice [9]. After expert consultation, the framework's title was modified from "Framework for Analyzing Cultural Representations in English Textbooks" to "Foreign Language Textbook Cultural Analysis Framework" to enhance its general applicability across languages [9]. Shin used this framework to analyze the cultural representations in the 2019 edition of PEP high school English textbooks, further confirming its effectiveness [18]. The framework includes two dimensions: content and form of presentation. Cultural content is categorized by region and form, with the regional dimension comprising: target language cultures (primarily those of English-speaking countries), learners' native culture (i.e., Chinese culture), other national cultures, and international culture. Based on this framework, the study analyzes the cultural content in the compulsory textbooks of the PEP high school English series. Both editions cover multiple cultural dimensions, with a relatively rich representation of target language and native culture content, while content from other cultures and international perspectives is comparatively limited. Reading texts form the foundation of various English teaching activities and are prominent carriers of cultural connotation and values. They offer rich material for in-depth textual analysis. Therefore, this study focuses on the reading passages in the "Reading" sections of the 2004 and 2019 editions of the PEP high school English compulsory textbooks. It aims to explore the diachronic evolution of Chinese and Western cultural content, with a particular focus on the distribution changes in learners' native culture and target language culture. Content from other national and international cultures is not the main focus of this study.

The study uses the number of reading texts as the unit of analysis and examines two dimensions: cultural type and thematic context. Culturally relevant reading passages were extracted from the "Reading" sections of the old and new editions. These texts were then categorized according to the framework into three cultural types — learners' native culture, target language culture, and comparative culture (both) — as well as three thematic contexts: "man and self", "man and society", and "man and nature". A cross-analysis of culture types and thematic contexts was conducted. Quantitative data were collected on the number and proportion of texts under each category to support comparative analysis and thematic trend exploration. Additionally, representative texts from the "Reading" sections of the textbooks were selected for case analysis, to further explore the thematic and cultural shifts and their implications for students' intercultural communicative competence.

4. Results and Analysis

This study conducted a statistical analysis of the collected data, calculating the distribution ratios of different cultural types and their corresponding thematic contexts ("man and self", "man and society", and "man and nature") in both the old and new editions, in order to reveal the structural characteristics and evolutionary trends in the presentation of cultural content in the textbooks. At the cultural type level, the data show a significant increase in the proportion of native culture in the new textbooks, a decrease in the proportion of target language culture, and a marked rise in the proportion of comparative cultural content. This reflects the textbooks' increased emphasis on native culture and heightened awareness of cultural comparison. At the thematic context level, "man and society" remains the core theme, dominating both editions; "man and nature" has slightly declined, while "man and self" has seen little change. Cross-analysis of cultural types and thematic contexts further reveals subtle shifts in thematic focus and directional changes in cultural presentation, offering crucial insight into the logic of textbook theme evolution.

The statistical results are shown in Table 1, Table 2, and Figure 1. In Tables 1 and 2, two representative examples were selected from each of the three cultural content categories in the textbooks.

Table 1. Proportion of Two Types of Cultural Content in the 2004 People's Education Press High School English Textbook.

Cultural Content	Proportion	Thematic Contexts	Number	Proportion	Examples
Learners' Native Culture	14.8%	Man and Society	2	7.4%	1. BIG FENG TO THE RESCUE (Book2 page45) 2. A SAD LOVE STORY (Book3 page7)
		Man and Nature	2	7.4%	1. A NIGHT THE EARTH DIDN'T SLEEP (Book1 page26) 2. THE RETURN OF THE MILU DEER (Book2 page65)
		Man and Self	1	3.7%	1. CAT'S IN THE CRADLE (Book2 page73)
Target Language Culture	77.8%	Man and Society	17	63.0%	1. ANNE'S BEST FRIEND (Book1 page2) 2. THE ROAD TO MODERN ENGLISH (Book1 page9) 3. STANDARD ENGLISH AND DIALECTS (Book1 page13) 4. ELIAS' STORY (Book1 page34) 5. THE REST OF ELIAS' STORY (Book1 page38) 6. FRIENDSHIP IN HAWAII (Book1 page44) 7. THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY (Book1 page51) 8. THE STORY OF AN EYEWITNESS (Book1 page65) 9. TWO IDEAS ABOUT BILL GATES (Book1 page73) 10. IN SEARCH OF THE AMBER ROOM (Book2 page1) 11. AN INTERVIEW (Book2 page9) 12. THE STORY OF ATLANTA (Book2 page14) 13. WHO AM I? (Book2 page18) 14. THE BAND THAT WASN'T (Book2 page34) 15. THE MILLION POUND BANK NOTE (Book3 page18)

| | | Man and Nature | 3 | 11.1% | 16. WINTER CARNIVAL IN QUEBEC (Book3 page44)
17. FOR/AGAINST BUILDING A MCDON-ALD'S (Book3 page52)
1. A TRIP ON "THE TRUE NORTH" (Book3 page34)
2. "THE TRUE NORTH" FROM TORONTO TO MONTREAL (Book3 page38)
3. IQALUIT — THE FROZEN TOWN (Book3 page74) |
| Comparison of Learners' Native Culture and Target Language Culture | 3.7% | Man and Society | 1 | 3.7% | 1. FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS (Book3 page1) |

Thematic Contexts	Number	Proportion
Man and Self	1	3.7%
Man and Society	20	74.07%
Man and Nature	5	18.5%

Note: The number of texts classified as "Other National Cultures and International Cultures" is 1, with a total of 27 texts counted.

Table 2. The Proportion of Two Types of Cultural Content in the 2019 People's Education Press High School English Textbook.

Cultural Content	Proportion	Thematic Contexts	Number	Proportion	Examples
Learners' Native Culture	38.5%	Man and Society	7	26.9%	1. A TRAVEL PLAN TO XI'AN (Book1 page30) 2. THE CHINESE WRITING SYSTEM: CONNECTING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT (Book1 page62) 3. PROMOTING CULTURE THROUGH DIGITAL IMAGES (Book2 page8) 4. MY AMAZING NAADAM EXPERIENCE (Book3 page8) 5. MOTHER OF TEN THOUSAND BABIES (Book3 page16) 6. WELCOME TO CHINATOWN! (Book3 page32) 7. THE CHINESE SPRING FESTIVAL (Book3 page64)
		Man and Nature	3	11.5%	1. A NIGHT THE EARTH DIDN'T SLEEP (Book1 page50) 2. A DAY IN THE CLOUDS (Book2 page16) 3. THE STRANGE TALE OF THE MILU DEER (Book2 page70)
		Man and Self	1	3.84%	1. CAT'S IN THE CRADLE (Book2 page88)
Target Language Culture	34.6%	Man and Society	7	26.9%	1. THE STORY OF AN EYEWITNESS (Adapted) (Book1 page92) 2. STRONGER TOGETHER: HOW WE HAVE BEEN CHANGED BY THE INTERNET (Book2 page28) 3. WHAT'S IN A NAME? (Book2 page40) 4. THE VIRTUAL CHOIR (Book2 page52) 5. A TRAVEL JOURNAL ABOUT SAN FRANCISCO (Book3 page28)

| Comparison of Learners' Native Culture and Target Language Culture | 15.4% | Man and Nature | 1 | 3.84% | 6. THE MILLION POUND BANK NOTE (Book3 page52)
7. SYMBOLS OF AMERICAN CULTURE (Book3 page76)
1. BEAUTIFUL IRELAND AND ITS TRADITIONS (Book2 page44) |
| | | Man and Society | 4 | 15.4% | 1. LIVING LEGENDS (Book1 page38)
2. NEW DISCOVERIES FROM THE PAST (Book2 page64)
3. WHY DO WE CELEBRATE FESTIVALS? (Book3 page4)
4. SPACE: THE FINAL FRONTIER (Book3 page40, 41) |

Thematic Contexts	Number	Proportion
Man and Self	1	3.8%
Man and Society	18	69.2%
Man and Nature	4	15.4%

Note: The number of texts classified as "Other National Cultures and International Cultures" is 3, with a total of 26 texts counted.
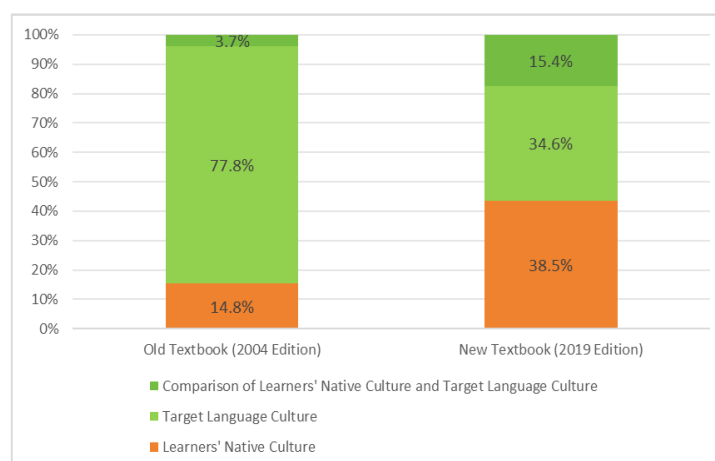

Figure 1. Changes in the Proportions of Two Types of Cultural Content in the Old and New People's Education Press High School English Textbooks.

In terms of textbook content structure, statistical data show that the proportion of native culture in the new textbooks increased significantly (from 14.8% to 38.5%). This change indicates a stronger focus in textbook compilation on integrating local culture to enhance students' cultural confidence and sense of identity. Although the old edition included passages such as "A SAD LOVE STORY" that incorporated elements of Chinese culture, these were relatively short and lacked depth, resulting in weak cultural representation [19]. In contrast, the new edition systematically showcases Chinese cultural features through multiple texts: "THE CHINESE WRITING SYSTEM: CONNECTING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT" details the evolution of Chinese characters, highlighting the historical continuity and uniqueness of Chinese culture; "PROMOTING CULTURE THROUGH DIGITAL IMAGES" illustrates the role of digital media in spreading Chinese culture, reflecting its international influence and awareness of cultural preservation; "MY AMAZING NAADAM EXPERIENCE" introduces minority cultures in China, emphasizing the diversity and richness of Chinese ethnic culture; and "WELCOME TO CHINATOWN!" focuses on overseas Chinese communities, helping learners understand the global dissemination of Chinese culture [20]. The increased presence of native cultural content in the textbooks helps students build cultural confidence, reinforce national identity, and enhance cultural expression during their English learning process.

Correspondingly, the proportion of target language culture in the new textbooks dropped significantly (from 77.8% to 34.6%). This change shows that the textbooks aim to guide students to maintain a native cultural perspective while learning English. In the old textbooks, passages such as "THE ROAD TO MODERN ENGLISH" and "STANDARD ENGLISH AND DIALECTS" provide detailed accounts of the historical development, language evolution, and cultural diversity of English-speaking countries, with significant cultural depth [19]. In contrast, the new textbooks, although including texts like "A Travel Journal About San Francisco" and "WHAT'S IN A NAME?" that touch on American and British culture, present this content in a more simplified manner, offering mainly basic introductions with limited exploration and expansion of cultural connotations [20]. The General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised 2020) clearly state that English textbooks should cultivate students' understanding of and ability to communicate Chinese culture [2]. Against this policy backdrop, textbook authors have reduced the proportion of target language culture, encouraging students to not only learn English but also to inherit and promote native culture and tell China's stories well.

The new textbooks also show a significant strengthening in the comparative presentation between learners' native culture and target language cultures (rising from 3.7% to 15.4%). This change indicates a stronger focus on cultivating students' intercultural awareness and comparative cultural abilities, emphasizing a communicative orientation based on cultural understanding, respect, and communication. In the old textbooks, such as FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS, multiple countries' festivals are mentioned, but the treatment remains superficial, merely listing information without deeply comparing the underlying values of Chinese and Western cultures [19]. The new textbooks, however, guide students to explore the cultural roots and values behind festival celebrations through WHY DO WE CELEBRATE FESTIVALS?; in LIVING LEGENDS, the athletic achievements of Lang Ping and Michael Jordan implicitly compare collectivism in Chinese sports culture with individualism in Western sports culture; SPACE: THE FINAL FRONTIER contrasts China's space achievements with those of other countries, revealing the cultural motivations behind technological development [20]. The increased proportion of comparative cultural content reflects textbook authors' higher expectations for students' cognitive abilities. The new textbook, by comparing the characteristics of different cultures, encourages students to actively apply higher order cognitive skills from Bloom's taxonomy such as analysis, evaluation, and creation, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of cultural differences and commonalities [21].

Analyzing from the perspective of thematic contexts, overall, the distribution structure of the three major thematic contexts remains relatively stable, but subtle shifts in proportion reveal adjustments in the focus of textbook content. "Man and society" remains the core thematic context for cultural presentation: it accounts for 74.07% of texts in the old textbooks and 69.2% in the new ones. In contrast, "man and nature" decreases from 18.5% in the old edition to 15.4% in the new edition; "man and self" remains low in both editions, at 3.7% and 3.8% respectively. Cross-tabulation of cultural types and thematic contexts further reveals trends in thematic shifts of textbook content. The thematic context configurations retain continuity, demonstrating logical consistency in textbook content design: Native culture content mainly concentrates on "man and society" and "man and nature" themes, without involving "man and self", indicating that the presentation of Chinese culture in textbooks emphasizes public values, social structure, and human–nature relationships. Target language culture content spans all three thematic contexts in both editions, helping students develop a multidimensional understanding of English-speaking countries' cultures; Comparative culture content in both editions appears only within the "man and society" thematic context, revealing the social and collective nature of comparative cultural themes. These three common features not only reflect the stability and functional orientation of content selection but also demonstrate the systematic and scientific nature of cultural structure and thematic design in textbook compilation, providing

useful references for continuous content optimization and enhancement of students' intercultural competence.

5. Conclusion

Through a systematic analysis of the "Reading" sections in the 2004 and 2019 editions of PEP's high school English textbooks, this study finds significant changes in both the selection of cultural content and its thematic presentation.

In terms of cultural type proportions, the new edition significantly increases the presence of native culture, reflecting a strong emphasis on the inheritance of local culture and the promotion of cultural confidence. Meanwhile, the proportion of target language culture has dropped substantially, indicating a deliberate effort to integrate native perspectives into English education and foster culturally grounded language learning. The notable increase in comparative cultural content guides students in developing critical cultural awareness and communicative competence through analysis and comparison. Regarding thematic shifts, while "man and society" remains central, there has been a moderate adjustment in the weight given to "man and nature" and "man and self".

In summary, the new textbooks demonstrate a more balanced, diverse, and multidimensional development in cultural content and thematic arrangement. These changes provide new pathways for English teaching practice and valuable experiences and directions for future textbook development.

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