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Integration of Foshan traditional culture into English language university curricula: Status, challenges, and strategic approaches

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Abstract

In contemporary Chinese education, a significant feature is the alignment and synergistic integration of ideological and political theory across various disciplines, including university English curricula. This integration involves embedding ideological and political education within all subject areas, thereby achieving a cohesive and comprehensive approach to curriculum development that fosters holistic student development. Integrating Foshan's local cultural elements into the English curriculum aims to achieve thematic ideological and political education that is guided by local culture, material-based ideological and political education supported by specific cultural imagery, and methodological ideological and political education based on teaching strategies. This approach weaves the ten key elements of Foshan's traditional culture into the curriculum's objectives, content presentation, and pedagogical practices. Such integration not only enhances the quality of professional knowledge instruction in higher education English courses but also enriches students' humanistic qualities, bolsters their perception and confidence in Foshan's local culture, and ultimately contributes to the cultivation of innovative talent.

Keywords: Foshan Traditional Culture; College English Curriculum; Ideological and Political Education; Status; Challenges; Practical Pathways

1. Introduction

The paradigm of international exchange characterized by multicultural integration presents novel challenges for contemporary foreign language education. In addition to emphasizing the development of students' competencies in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, there is an increasing need to cultivate cross-cultural communicators who exhibit robust political awareness and profound ideological insight. Incorporating ideological and political education into English instruction can significantly enhance students' ideological and political awareness, bolster their national self-esteem and pride, and foster a stronger sense of national identity. In 2016, President Xi Jinping issued a call to action at the Symposium on Ideological and Political Theory in Schools, urging universities, as well as primary and secondary schools, to integrate ideological and political education into their curricula to cultivate socialist builders and successors. In response, the education system across China has actively advanced the development of ideological and political curriculum (Wu & Xu, 2018). However, traditional college foreign language instruction in mainland Chinese settings primarily emphasizes the development of knowledge and skills. This approach often involves a unidirectional integration of foreign culture, which overlooks the essential cultivation of students' patriotism, cultural awareness, and political acumen. As a result, students may struggle to maintain a steadfast political stance and cultural confidence in cross-cultural communication (Jiang, 2024). Furthermore, Curriculum-based ideological and political education represents a key application of the principle of fostering virtue and nurturing talent within the educational framework. Given that cultural education is predominantly realized within the school setting, there remains a need for further investigation to achieve a coherent and integrated approach between these two dimensions (Guo, 2024).

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Nevertheless, there remains a relative paucity of research on the incorporation of traditional culture, particularly the “Top Ten Traditional Cultures” of Foshan, into the ideological and political education of English language curricula.

Addressing the current gap in higher education foreign language curricula, where local cultural content is minimal and integration of local culture into ideological and political education remains inadequate, thus, this project aims to incorporate Foshan’s “Top Ten Traditional Cultures” into the ideological and political education of foreign language courses. The objective is to overcome deficiencies in local cultural representation and educational orientation within these curricula. Specifically, the current study aims to address the following two research questions: (1) What is the current state of integrating regional culture into ideological and political education within foreign language curricula at the university level, and what challenges are encountered? and (2) What strategies can be employed to integrate Foshan’s traditional culture into university-level foreign language instruction? This study offers a significant and adaptable model for foreign language education, providing a valuable reference for similar higher education institutions seeking to enhance their educational practices.

2. Literature review

2.1. Curriculum ideological and political education

Curriculum ideological and political education is of importance to educational institutions at every level. As outlined by Cai (2021), the primary functions of curriculum-based ideological and political education are to cultivate individuals, implement moral instruction, and establish for students a correct worldview, outlook on life, and value system. Currently, academic discourse on ideological and political education in the curriculum reflects two distinct perspectives. The first, termed the “curriculum view,” advocates for the seamless integration of ideological and political education throughout all facets of classroom teaching reform, with the goal of achieving a subtle and pervasive impact. The second perspective conceptualizes ideological and political education as a comprehensive educational framework and methodology, encompassing a diverse array of approaches, techniques, and procedures for its implementation (Pan, 2021).

Unlike traditional subject teaching, ideological and political education extends beyond the mere delivery of knowledge, experience, or practice. It embodies an integrative framework that interlaces knowledge, skills, and values throughout all academic disciplines, thereby permeating every dimension of educational practice and activity (Pan, 2021; Zhan et al., 2021). Curriculum ideological and political education represents a comprehensive reform of the educational system, necessitating the integration of ideological and political elements—such as morality, character, consciousness, concepts, and personality—into various specialized courses to fundamentally transform educational and teaching methods (He & Yu, 2021). Meanwhile, as documented by Gao and Zong (2017), the essence of curriculum ideological and political education lies in its conceptualization of curriculum as a whole. It does not entail the mere addition of a new course or activity. Rather, it involves embedding ideological and political education throughout every facet of curriculum design and reform, thereby subtly achieving the objective of cultivating virtue and guiding students’ moral development. Therefore, in the present study, the curriculum ideological and political education was regarded as a comprehensive education conception and method. Methodologically, curriculum ideological and political education should be integrated into college English courses. Conceptually, as an educational concept, curriculum ideological and political education should be treated as an implicit knowledge in college English teaching.

2.2. The traditional cultures of Foshan city

As a valuable cultural heritage of China, the rich and profound traditional culture offers a wealth of teaching materials for ideological and political education within higher education English courses, while simultaneously infusing this initiative with sustained vitality. In China’s esteemed traditional culture, moral cultivation is regarded as essential for personal development, encompassing virtues such as integrity, righteousness, and benevolence. These virtues are in close alignment with the goals of humanities education, including English language instruction. Incorporating moral cultivation into higher education English courses enables students to engage with the allure of traditional culture while learning a foreign language, thereby elevating their moral standards. Regional culture serves as a symbol of China’s esteemed traditional culture and embodies the essence of advanced socialist culture. It plays a crucial role in fostering cultural confidence in socialism with Chinese characteristics (X. Chen & Qin, 2022; Wang et al., 2024).

Foshan, a city renowned for its rich cultural heritage, boasts a diverse array of traditional elements that define its unique identity. The major 10 components of the local Foshan cultures are as follows.

(1) Southern Red Bean Cantonese Opera Culture: this traditional form of Cantonese opera, known for its distinctive regional style and rich musical heritage, plays a significant role in Foshan’s cultural landscape. The “Southern Red Bean” represents a unique subset of Cantonese opera, characterized by its specific performance style and thematic elements. As a traditional Chinese art form encompassing music, singing, martial arts, acrobatics, and acting, Southern Red Bean Cantonese Opera continues to be widely appreciated in Guangdong, Guangxi, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia (Zeng, 2023).

(2) World-Renowned Kung Fu Culture: Foshan is famous for its deep roots in martial arts, particularly Wing Chun kung fu. This form of martial arts has gained international acclaim and reflects the city’s historical significance as a center for martial arts training and development (Feng et al., 2018). Foshan is home to over 10,000 martial arts practitioners, nearly 300 martial arts schools, 105 kung fu arenas, and more than 200,000 people actively engaged in martial arts training.

(3) Dragon Boat Culture: The dragon boat races held in Foshan are a vivid expression of local traditions (Zhan et al., 2021). These races, which are part of the broader dragon boat festival, highlight the city’s cultural celebration through competitive and ceremonial events.

(4) Vibrant Drum and Lion Dance Culture: Drum and lion dances are integral to many local festivities and celebrations in Foshan (Zhu, 2011). Foshan awakening lion, representing the Southern lion has garnered global attention for their performances are characterized by their energetic and rhythmic qualities, symbolizing good fortune and warding off evil spirits (S. Zhan & Thani, 2024).

(5) Exquisite Craftsmanship Culture: Foshan is widely recognized for its exceptional craftsmanship, which encompasses a range of traditional arts such as ceramics, woodworking, and metalworking. This artisanal heritage is a testament to the high level of skill and artistic expression of local artisans. The city’s ceramics, for example, are renowned for their fine quality and intricate designs, reflecting centuries of craftsmanship and innovation. Foshan’s woodworking, characterized by detailed carvings and traditional techniques, further exemplifies the city’s rich cultural heritage and its artisans’ dedication to preserving and advancing these skills (Zhang & Liu, 2020).

(6) Beneficial Food Culture: Foshan’s food culture is notable for its diversity and rich flavors, reflecting both its historical and contemporary culinary practices. The city’s cuisine, which includes a variety of dishes such as dim sum and roasted meats, is not only a source of enjoyment but also plays a significant role in promoting the health and well-being of its residents (Li & Yang, 2021). The balance of ingredients and the emphasis on fresh, high-quality produce are key aspects of Foshan’s food culture that contribute to its residents’ overall health. Additionally, the culinary traditions of Foshan offer insights into the local community’s values and social practices, further enriching the understanding of its cultural heritage (Zhao & Tan, 2022).

(7) Autumn colors culture: Autumn in Foshan is characterized by a rich array of cultural activities and festivals, which highlight the city’s dynamic seasonal celebrations and traditions. The 2023 Foshan Autumn Parade, a prominent example, attracted 460,000 spectators across two nights, with 330,000 visitors attending the event in Chancheng District and an additional 130,000 in Xiqiao Town, Nanhai District, which hosted the parade for the first time. The “Foshan Autumn Colors” activities were initially developed to celebrate the harvest, express gratitude for favorable weather, and honor local residents. The enduring appeal and vitality of these activities over centuries can be attributed to a combination of factors. These include their alignment with the agricultural calendar—coinciding with the harvest season and the forthcoming farming off-season—as well as significant social elements such as ancestor commemoration, the growth of commercial and artisanal industries, and the overall community harmony. As a result, “Foshan Autumn Colors” has become a major folk event in Foshan, ranking alongside the key Spring and Autumn festivals (Chen, 2024).

(8) Ancestral temple culture: Ancestral temples in Foshan are crucial in fostering community cohesion and preserving family heritage. These temples serve as important cultural and social hubs for residents. Foshan’s Ancestor Temple is renowned as the “Palace of Eastern Art” for its exquisite architectural decoration, featuring the “Three Carvings and Two Sculptures” style. The temple’s intricate brick carvings, wood carvings, gray sculptures, and Shiwan ceramic ridge sculptures are all distinguished by their unique Cantonese opera characteristics, making them famous far and wide (Li, 2024).

(9) Culture of Loyalty and Integrity: The values of loyalty and integrity are deeply embedded in Foshan’s cultural fabric. Historically known as “Zhongyi Township,” the city features Zhongyi Road, a notable site dedicated to celebrating the township’s storied legacy of loyalty and righteousness. Foshan is also home to several significant landmarks, such as the

Three Loyalty Temples, which honor the city's esteemed figures of loyalty and heroism. These principles have profoundly influenced Foshan's spiritual identity and traditional values. During the turbulent revolutionary era of modern history, Foshan produced notable heroes such as Deng Pei, Luo Dengxian, Chen Tiejun, Huang Su, and Zhang Yunfeng. These individuals, unwavering in their dedication to the people's liberation and revolutionary ideals, were prepared to sacrifice their lives for their cause. The enduring values of loyalty and integrity continue to shape social interactions and are celebrated through various cultural practices and traditions in Foshan.

Together, these elements form a rich cultural tapestry that offers a unique backdrop for integrating English language teaching with ideological and political education. By leveraging these cultural strengths, educators can create engaging and contextually relevant learning experiences that connect language acquisition with local values and traditions.

2.3. The value implications of ideological and political education in college English courses

Defining the optimal attributes of individuals to be educated stands as a pivotal inquiry within the Chinese educational paradigm. Shaping moral integrity serves as the cornerstone obligation and ultimate aspiration of this educational system. As China progresses into a new epoch, institutions of higher learning bear a profound duty to groom future socialist architects and heirs. Consequently, every academic course is charged with the vital undertaking of molding students into comprehensive, fully developed individuals. The value implications of ideological and political education in college English courses encompass five aspects. (1) Cultivating Students' Values: Integrating ideological and political education into English teaching helps students form correct worldviews, life perspectives, and values. This approach enhances their sense of identity with society, the nation, and culture while they are learning the language. (2) Enhancing Cross-Cultural Communication Skills: Introducing ideological and political content in English courses enables students to think more deeply about cultural differences and commonalities while understanding and using a foreign language. This improves their cross-cultural communication abilities and self-confidence. (3) Promoting Comprehensive Development: Ideological and political education in the curriculum not only focuses on language skills but also emphasizes the development of students' comprehensive qualities, including critical thinking, moral judgment, and social responsibility. These aspects are crucial for students' overall growth. (4) Strengthening Patriotism: Through ideological and political education in English courses, students gain a better understanding of the nation's history and culture, thereby enhancing their patriotism and sense of social responsibility. This encourages them to contribute to national and societal development. (5) Responding to the Era's Demands: In the context of globalization, educating students with both an international perspective and national pride is a crucial mission. Ideological and political education offers a new direction for English teaching, adapting to the changes and needs of the times.

3. Current Status: Integration of Culture into University Foreign Language Teaching

The integration of cultural elements into university-level foreign language instruction has increasingly become a critical focal point within academic contexts. This evolving pedagogical shift can be examined across several key dimensions, each reflecting broader trends in language education (Kramsch, 2013).

3.1. Incorporation of Cultural Content into the Curriculum

An increasing number of foreign language programs at universities are embedding cultural components into their curricula. These programs aim to go beyond mere linguistic proficiency by introducing students to the history, societal norms, traditions, and cultural practices of the regions where the target language is spoken (Liddicoat & Angela, 2013). This approach facilitates a more profound contextual understanding of the language, allowing students to grasp the socio-cultural factors that shape its usage and evolution. By engaging with these cultural elements, learners develop a more holistic understanding of the language as a living entity, deeply intertwined with its native speakers' ways of life.

3.2. Diversification of Pedagogical Approaches

To effectively integrate cultural education into foreign language instruction, educators are adopting a diverse array of pedagogical strategies. These include methods such as case studies, cross-cultural comparisons, and situational simulations, all designed to provide students with practical applications of the language in culturally relevant contexts (Seelye, 1993). Such approaches aim to enhance not only linguistic competence but also cross-cultural communication skills by encouraging students to identify and navigate the cultural contrasts and commonalities between their own experiences and those of the target culture (Bennett, 1998).

3.3. Enhanced Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Many academic institutions are fostering interdisciplinary collaboration to enrich the cultural dimension of foreign language education. By integrating language courses with disciplines such as cultural studies, sociology, anthropology,

and history, these programs offer students a multidimensional learning experience. This interdisciplinary approach enables learners to explore the complex relationship between language and culture from various academic perspectives, deepening their understanding of how cultural contexts influence language use and vice versa (Kramsch, 2014). This collaboration between departments also encourages a more comprehensive and critical examination of global cultural dynamics, contributing to a well-rounded educational experience (Risager, 2007).

3.4. Utilization of Digital Resources

The advent of digital technology has transformed the landscape of foreign language education, particularly in the realm of cultural integration. The use of online courses, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and other digital tools has expanded the availability of cultural materials, providing students with immersive experiences that bring the target culture to life in ways that were previously unavailable (Hubbard, 2017). These technologies allow for interactive engagement with cultural contexts, enabling students to experience, for instance, virtual tours of historically significant sites or simulated cultural interactions, which deepen their cultural comprehension while enhancing their language skills (Pegrum et al., 2020).

3.5. Addressing Diverse Student Needs

The growing diversity in student backgrounds and expectations has also influenced the integration of cultural content in foreign language programs. Today's students are not only interested in mastering the language but are also seeking a comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural nuances that accompany it (Fantini, 2009). As a result, universities must continuously adapt their curricula to address these evolving needs, ensuring that language instruction is relevant to students' professional, academic, and personal interests (Byram et al., 2002). This shift towards a more culturally inclusive language education reflects the broader demands of a globalized world, where cross-cultural competence is increasingly recognized as an essential skill (Deardorff, 2006).

While significant strides have been made in integrating cultural elements into university foreign language teaching, there remain challenges that must be addressed. Future efforts should focus on further deepening the integration of culture into curricula and pedagogical practices to enhance students' linguistic and cultural competencies (Risager, 2018). By doing so, foreign language education will continue to evolve, equipping students with the skills necessary for effective communication in an increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse world (Kramsch, 2020).

4. Paths to Integrating Local Culture into College English Courses

The integration of local culture into college English courses is essential for enhancing both the effectiveness of language instruction and students' cross-cultural communication skills. Several key strategies can facilitate this integration (Song, 2024). This project investigates the integration of local cultural elements into ideological and political education within foreign language curricula at the tertiary level. It employs a multi-faceted approach, including the design of comprehensive teaching content, the development of resource repositories, the construction of innovative classroom models, the formulation of second curricula and campus culture initiatives, and the establishment of evaluation methodologies.

4.1. Design of Teaching Content with Dual Subjects

To embed ideological and political education seamlessly into the curriculum, a "pre-class input, in-class discussion, post-class output" model will be implemented. For instance, when integrating elements of Foshan's "Top Ten Traditional Cultures" into the core English course "Comprehensive English," practical examples can be utilized. In Unit 9 of the third volume of "Comprehensive English," titled "Chinese Food," which explores the dissemination of Chinese cuisine in the West and the philosophical underpinnings of dining culture, such as the Daoist concept of "unity of heaven and man," the following instructional design can be applied:

Pre-Class: Distribute videos and articles comparing Chinese and Western cuisines, alongside promotional materials on Chinese food, to provide students with an initial understanding of Chinese culinary traditions.

In-Class: Facilitate group discussions where students share their experiences with Foshan cuisine and its cultural significance, promoting active engagement and reflection.

Post-Class: Assign a project wherein students, working in groups, prepare a traditional Foshan dish and present its preparation process and cultural context in English. This activity aims to enhance students' practical understanding of Foshan culture.

Additionally, creating a class blog or WeChat public account titled “Telling Foshan Culture in English” can support the dissemination of micro-lectures and videos on Foshan’s local culture, gradually establishing a robust ideological and political education framework. This approach will facilitate a comprehensive understanding of Foshan’s traditional culture, bolster cross-cultural communication skills, and heighten ideological awareness.

Furthermore, the project intends to integrate student-contributed materials related to cultural themes, achieving a dual-subject content design. This strategy is designed to stimulate student interest, foster interdisciplinary thinking, and enhance both cultural identity and global perspectives. By organically incorporating local culture into English instruction, the initiative aims to simultaneously improve teaching quality and ideological impact.

4.2. Development of a Multimodal Teaching Resource Repository

Effective ideological and political education necessitates the careful selection of teaching materials. Recent publications by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, such as “English Talks on Chinese Culture,” “Chinese Culture English Course,” and “English Translations of Chinese Cultural Classics,” have provided valuable resources. However, English-language materials focusing specifically on local cultural elements remain limited. Thus, developing localized language materials for English textbooks is essential. The project will prioritize the curation and refinement of local cultural content, focusing on its core aspects while excluding less pertinent elements, to create exemplary teaching resources that integrate local culture with ideological education. A comprehensive repository of teaching resources related to Foshan culture—including images, videos, and audio materials—will be developed to facilitate a more intuitive and immersive understanding of Foshan’s cultural elements. This multimodal approach will enable teachers to present Foshan’s “Top Ten Traditional Cultures” through diverse formats, enhancing student engagement and interaction.

4.3. Construction of a “Classroom-Extracurricular” Teaching Model

To maximize the effectiveness of ideological and political education within foreign language courses, the project proposes a “classroom-extracurricular” teaching model that leverages student agency. Interactive methods such as group discussions, role-playing, and case analyses will be employed to engage students in learning about Foshan culture, while also developing their teamwork and cross-cultural communication skills. The use of varied teaching methods is expected to foster enthusiasm, strengthen cultural identity, and deepen understanding of Foshan culture. Additionally, the development of second curricula and campus culture initiatives will involve students visiting historical sites, museums, and traditional craft shops in Foshan to experience its cultural heritage firsthand. Students will be encouraged to participate in English-language competitions related to traditional culture, such as the “Telling China’s Story in English” speech competition and the “Telling China’s Story in English” short video competition, to further promote learning and cultural engagement. Classroom activities will include traditional craft-making and food preparation related to Foshan’s culture, with students presenting their experiences in English. This experiential learning approach aims to enhance students’ ability to express cultural insights meaningfully.

5. Conclusion

The integration of Foshan’s traditional culture into university English curricula offers substantial educational benefits. This approach not only elevates the quality of professional knowledge instruction but also enriches students’ humanistic attributes, deepens their understanding and appreciation of Foshan’s local culture, and fosters the development of innovative talents. This study presents a crucial and adaptable framework for foreign language education, providing valuable insights for similar higher education institutions aiming to enhance their pedagogical practices. Through the development of comprehensive teaching materials, creation of resource libraries, design of innovative classroom models, formulation of supplementary curricula and campus culture initiatives, and establishment of robust assessment methods, the effective incorporation of local culture into foreign language instruction can be achieved, thereby enhancing both instructional effectiveness and students’ cross-cultural communication competencies.

Compliance with ethical standards

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