



# Fostering a Meta-cultural Competence for Chinese Students: A Cultural Discourse Analysis Perspective

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**Abstract.** Studies conducted around cultural representation in Chinese College ELT textbooks have indicated that they are not predominantly designed for fostering students' intercultural communicative competences. In this view, this study explored how the currently used 3rd edition of the Chinese ELT textbook series NHCE demonstrated Chinese cultural conceptualisation of the English language and contributed to the development of students' meta-cultural competence within both domestic and international contexts. It focused on the cultural conceptual features of Chinese values and themes embedded in the cultural content of *New Horizon College English* (NHCE) and explored how these features were presented and contextualised in NHCE and further impacted on students' cultivation of meta-cultural competence. This study employed content analysis and cultural discourse analysis to support the discussion of cultural embodiments between images, data, and texts to investigate two research questions, i.e., i) What evidence of cultural event schemas demonstrates Chinese nativisation and conceptualisation of the English language in the NHCE textbook series? and ii) How may the identified evidence impact on the development of Chinese students' meta-cultural competence? A semiotic analysis approach was adopted for this study to examine the indexical linkage between texts and images in generating potential Chinese cultural conceptualisation meanings. This study underscored the value of integrating the cultural linguistic knowledge of students' mother language into ELT materials, supporting future textbook writers in designing culturally rich content that cultivates students' intercultural competences in a real-life scenario.

**Keywords:** Cultural Conceptualisation, Meta-cultural Competence, Cultural Event Schema, Intercultural Communication.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

The research objectives regarding the relationship between ELT textbooks' cultural components and their influence on helping students improve intercultural competences have varied over time. A series of instructions have been put forward on the developmental direction of Chinese national education, including inheriting and carrying forward Chinese culture, deepening the reform of teaching materials regarding Chinese cultural integration, improving the positive influence of Chinese culture in intercultural communication, and adequately integrating Chinese culture with cultures of other nations. Additionally, to carry forward Chinese culture and communicate Chinese characteristic-centred cultural values and themes to people around the world through intercultural communication. Therefore, the competence that this study focuses

on is meta-cultural competence proposed by [17]. It is a competence that “enables interlocutors of different speech communities to use the same language to communicate and negotiate their respective cultural conceptualisations during the process of intercultural communication” [17]. A significant element of this competence is that people from different speech communities could use the same language such as English, to encode their own cultural conceptualisations in intercultural communication [17]. The cultural conceptualisations go beyond the level of individual language users and can be perceived as the collective level of a particular cultural group [17].

According to the review of a range of cultural content-based studies conducted on Chinese College ELT textbooks over the past decade (e.g., [11, 23, 24, 25, 32]), two main findings that could negatively impact the cultivation of Chinese students’ cross-cultural communicative ability. The first main finding is that an uneven distribution of different culture types has been found to be prevalent in many nationally compiled ELT textbook series. The second is that current ELT textbooks in China including NHCE, only contain limited Chinese cultural knowledge, and most of the relevant Chinese cultural contents are expressed in an implicit way. Additionally, based on the review of previous studies, the research gap can be clearly summarised in two aspects: i) although statistics can easily and clearly reflect superficial evidence of the embodiment of cultural elements, they cannot identify evidence that is implicitly portrayed, and ii) research discussions have usually relied too much on quantitative data identified from texts (see Section 2.2 for details).

In view of the lack of in-depth exploration of Chinese cultural representation and distribution in ELT textbooks, and to address the research gap, this study employed a semiotic approach to examine the culture and cultural potentials embedded in NHCE. The findings assisted in examining the Chinese cultural values and themes and further revealed how this textbook series contributed to the development of Chinese students’ meta-cultural competence. Furthermore, this study has extended upon previous explorations and shifted the research focus into English nativisation in China and Chinese cultural conceptualisations. This has been achieved through critical discussion of how the identified evidence could reflect localisation and contextualisation and further facilitated students’ meta-cultural competence.

## 1.2 Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

RQ 1: What evidence of cultural event schemas demonstrates Chinese nativisation and conceptualisation of the English language in the NHCE textbook series?

RQ 2: How may the identified evidence impact on the development of Chinese students’ meta-cultural competence?

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

According to [16]’s proposal of cultural conceptualisations, cultural schemas consist of five types, which are role schema, image schema, proposition schema, event schema, and emotion schema. The schema employed in this study to investigate Chinese cultural conceptualisations is the cultural event schema. Cultural event schemas are often abstracted from the experiences of certain events [16], and the same items that an event schema represents might be perceived and treated considerably different across

cultures. For instance, a Chinese wedding event schema may be associated with *miànzi* (face and interpersonal relationships) and *laissee* (subschema of a Chinese wedding event schema, referring to a red envelope with money) [31].

Given that this study was conducted from a Chinese discourse analysis perspective, the three principles for the construction of Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS), as proposed by [19], were also introduced. It has been stressed that Chinese people are in the habit of using limited language forms to express rich meaning potentials [19]. Their expressions help manifest the adaption of Chinese specific cultural norms and standards. Hence, content analysis requires not merely sticking to the texts only but reflecting on the local cultures and social contexts as well. [19] further advised that the development of non-western discourse analysis standards has provided opportunities for scholars to achieve transcultural critique and facilitate cross-culturally innovative discourse studies. In this regard, this study took the three principles of CDS construction into consideration, which are i) take root in local social contexts and based upon the particular needs of local culture; ii) use global vision to deal with cultural diversity and human concerns; and iii) positively communicate the conceptual, theoretical, methodological and terminological aspects with relevant global scholarly traditions.

## 2.2 Previous Studies on Cultural Content Analysis of College ELT Textbooks

The extent to which various cultures are depicted in College ELT textbooks has inevitably become a concern for Chinese scholars for years. A number of researchers have witnessed that cultural distribution is the first choice for investigating how ELT textbooks help strengthen Chinese students' intercultural competences in intercultural communication [8]. It is encouraging to see that many Chinese scholars have drawn attention to the way and extent to which ELT textbooks reveal diverse cultures and have demonstrated that cultural distributions are not nearly sufficient to strengthen students' communicative ability with intercultural contacts. Their studies have also provoked their awareness of the rapid globalisation and increasingly important localisation. Although previous studies have set goals to explore the representations and conceptualisations of various cultures in textbooks at the beginning of their research, many of those reviewed in this study have only calculated and listed the percentages of cultures distributed in the textbooks and then made hasty conclusions. In contrast, the two studies proposed by [4] and [2] have more advantages over the Chinese studies, as they employed adequate theories and appropriate analytical frameworks to critically analyse the effects of incorporating different cultural values in ELT textbooks. The following paragraphs reviewed relevant studies conducted by both Chinese and western scholars accordingly.

Exploration of cultural distributions in Chinese College ELT textbooks can be dated back to the early 2000s. [30] conducted a study based on a textbook called *College English: Intensive Reading*, 97.5% of texts have been written by authors from the U.S.A. and British sources, hence there was almost no reflection of cultures of other nations. A range of Chinese scholars have gradually paid attention to this field and the number of related studies has doubled since 2010 [8]. According to an investigation conducted on the *New College English Integrated Course* (volumes 1-4) in 2010, it was shown that the depiction of the cultures of the U.K. and the U.S.A. comprised 68.7% of the total texts, in contrast, local culture only consisted of 1.56% [23]. Moreover, none of the texts helped students seek common ground while respecting cultural differences [23]. [11] systematically analysed ten sets of ELT textbooks, including the third edition of NHCE. It has been found that the American and British texts dominated

at 81.2% [11]. In comparison, the non-English speaking countries only took a negligible ratio of 0.6% in the texts, and the local culture depiction merely constituted 3% [11].

Further to this, [25] explored five sets of ELT textbooks, including NHCE (2nd), to explore the trend of culture distributions. This came to the same conclusion as the previously mentioned studies, that the British and American cultures have overwhelmingly dominated the first position of cultural knowledge in these textbooks. In a later study, [24] also examined the situation of bilateral cultural input in the *21st Century College English Reading and Writing 3* from a cultural security perspective. The findings showed beyond doubt that in this textbook, the British and American cultures continued to comprise the majority of cultural knowledge. Compared to similar studies of other ELT textbooks, the percentage of descriptions of local culture in this textbook plunged to 0%. However, it is notable that there have been some discourses to some extent that drew attention to cultural comparisons and common cultures, with 7.3% and 23%, respectively.

Moreover, [4] examined how the tasks and reading materials in the *New College English Integrated Course* series have been associated with the development of Chinese students' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). The findings showed that there were no adequate reading tasks encouraging students to communicate their new cultural knowledge and resonate with their own Chinese cultural background. Thus, on this basis, this series did not avail to promote students' ICC. Furthermore, although the texts have included abundant cultural references and examples of communications occurring in various social situations, this series did not facilitate the students becoming aware of the rich cultural knowledge that the textbooks have provided for them, hence students only received meagre success of ICC.

Semiotic analysis has been remaining relatively uncommon among a substantial body of studies conducted in this field. The study conducted by [2] distinguished itself through its employment of an analytical approach, employing a semiotic analysis to yield a deeper understanding of textbook-centred cultural discourses. [2] investigated an ELT textbook called *New Headway: Intermediate* that was being used in a Vietnamese university. The study explored how texts and images represented cultural conceptualisations and the way that tasks accompanied the cultivation of meta-cultural competence through a cultural tea drinking event schema. A criteria of four main types of task questions and a number of sub-questions were aligned with Freeman's classification of reading questions to determine how the tasks in the textbook helped foster students' interactions between schemas portrayed in the texts and their own opinions towards the given schemas, and how students' scenarios of mutual understanding of various cultures were developed when intercultural contacts occurred in their real lives. The results fell far short of [2]'s criteria, as the questions in the tasks seldom compelled the students to reflect on the schemas depicted in the texts as those tasks were merely designed to accentuate the enhancement of linguistic knowledge. When learning a language, students are required to cultivate the capability to "distinguish information from disinformation, consequential from trivial" [5], to enable them to give critical evaluations between local cultures and cultures of other nations. Consequently, [2] reiterated that texts, images and tasks should be systematically combined to provide opportunities to provoke students' awareness of developing transcultural consciousness. Given that the two examples analysed in this study include texts, images, and tasks, semiotic analysis was adopted in the procedure as it offered an indexical anchor that assisted in exploring how the English language impacted the cultivation of meta-cultural competence.

## **3 Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Method**

For the purpose of this study, document analysis was adopted to answer the research questions. It is an effective tool that can be used to systematically evaluate and review printed documentary materials, such as books, images, and charts [1]. Given that this study extracted evidence from cultural content, and examined cultural values and themes within the evidence, the research method benefitted from the involvement of content analysis and thematic analysis.

### **3.2 Data Sources**

The data sources for this study were drawn from the third edition of the NHCE Reading and Writing series, specifically Books A, B, C, and D [33], published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) in 2017. This series was developed to teach first and second year non-English major college and university students in mainland China. The data identified in this study centred on the texts, translation exercises, and images.

### **3.3 Analytical Procedure**

To investigate the research questions, a semiotic analysis was conducted to explore how Chinese cultural themes and values involved in the data facilitated the development of Chinese students' meta-cultural competence. [27] have indicated that the semiotic analysis can complement studies that explore cultural conceptualisations in teaching materials without working on any single text, image, or task as primary. This helps researchers examine the interrelationship among these factors, and uncover the meaning potentials that they generate in the textbooks. It is crucial to accept that neither texts, images, nor tasks are independent cultural signs with "prior identifiable meanings" [27]; on the contrary, they generate deeper cultural meanings through their complex interactions. In this study, the semiotic analysis [27] promoted the exploration of how texts and images set their indexical relationship in generating potential Chinese cultural meanings. It also helped explore how the cultural meanings conveyed through the process of semiosis enlightened them to resonate with what they had heard and seen in real life.

## **4 Findings and Discussion**

Cultural event schemas were the focus when examining cultural conceptual features in this study. The cultural events incorporated in NHCE mainly centred on the topics of Chinese traditional cultural heritage and historical stories. Specifically, the identified data included tea drinking, calligraphy writing, and world exploration.


Two examples were selected for delineation in this section, namely, i) tea drinking event schema and ii) world exploration event schema. The identified data were closely associated with various Chinese cultural themes and values such as economy, education, and diplomacy. The cultural conceptual evidence contained in this textbook series were collected and analysed in accordance with [16]'s proposal of cultural conceptual strategies (cultural schemas: cultural event schemas).

Examples 1 and 2 were used to explore how Chinese nativisation and conceptualisation of the English language were demonstrated in relation to the cultural event schemas incorporated in the NHCE textbook series. These two examples were further utilised to investigate how Chinese cultural conceptualisations of widely understood event schemas were embodied through the semiosis generated by the texts and the images to facilitate the development of Chinese students' meta-cultural competence.

#### 4.1 Example 1: Tea Drinking

Example 1 was excerpted from the translation exercise of Unit 5, Book C. The topic of the translation exercise of this unit was centred around tea drinking, in which a cultural event of British tea drinking, was explicitly portrayed. Specifically, Fig. 1 introduced the history of British tea drinking and how the tea drinking etiquette was nativised to adapt to the British culture of politeness and hospitality. Fig. 2 illustrated the history of Chinese tea culture and tea drinking, and how tea drinking related to Chinese people's life. Fig. 3 was the answer key for the Chinese-to-English translation exercise shown in Fig. 2.

**9** Translate the following paragraph into Chinese.



The English ceremony of afternoon tea dates back to the 1840s. The tradition evolved out of the rituals and routines that surrounded tea drinking in Britain before that time. Tea was first introduced to England in the late 1650s, but for a long time, it was only consumed by the royal family and the aristocracy due to its high cost. The habit of having afternoon tea did not become established until almost 200 years later. In those days, the British ate only two daily meals: a large breakfast late in the morning and a late dinner around 8 o'clock in the evening. Anna, the 7th Duchess of Bedford, can be credited for creating the tradition of afternoon tea to soothe hunger pangs before supper. She invited friends to join her for an additional afternoon meal at four to five o'clock. The menu included tea and snacks such as dainty cakes and sandwiches. Fine porcelain (瓷器) was used to serve this minor feast. Afternoon tea soon became popular, and is now a symbol of the elegant British way of life. As novelist Henry James wrote, "There are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea."

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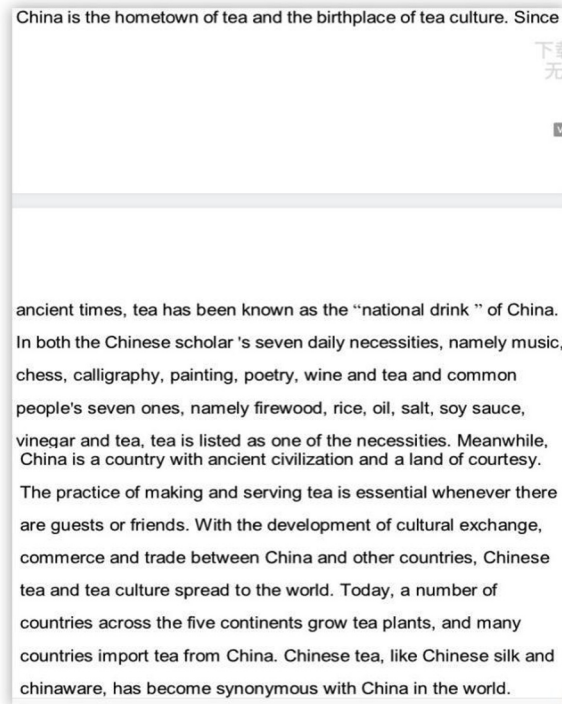
Fig. 1. The English-to-Chinese Translation Exercise of Unit 5, Book C.

10 Translate the following paragraph into English.



中国是茶的故乡，也是茶文化的发源地。自古以来，茶就被誉为中华民族的“国饮”。无论是文人墨客生活中的“琴棋书画诗酒茶”，还是平民百姓生活中的“柴米油盐酱醋茶”，茶都是必备品。同时，中国又是文明古国，礼仪之邦。凡是来了客人或朋友，沏茶、敬茶的礼仪必不可少。随着中外文化交流和商业贸易的发展，中国茶及茶文化传向了全世界。现在五大洲有不少国家种茶，也有很多国家从中国进口茶。中国茶和中国的丝绸及瓷器一样，已经成为中国在全世界的代名词。

Fig. 2. The Chinese-to-English Translation Exercise of Unit 5, Book C.



[18]

**Fig. 3.** The Answer Key for the Chinese-to-English Translation Exercise of Unit 5, Book C.

### **Tea Drinking as a Cultural Heritage that Permeates the Fabric of Chinese Society.**

In regard to Fig. 3, the Chinese paragraph illustrated that “China is ... the birthplace of the tea culture” [3], and tea served as the “national drink” in Chinese society [3]. According to historical studies, the derivation of tea drinking can be dated back to the Shen Nong Period [18]. Shen Nong, the leader of the Chinese Jiang tribe in prehistoric times, accidentally ingested a poisonous plant and then felt ill. He sat under a tea tree in order to ease the discomfort of his body, when suddenly some leaves (tea) fell in front of him. He swallowed them and found his body was detoxicated. Therefore, he regarded these leaves as a kind of antidote against the herb he had eaten and named the leaves chá (tea). The Chinese ancestors used to chew raw tea leaves to keep their bodies healthy, but soon they noticed that the boiled tea tasted better, and thereby, gradually developed tea drinking as a habitual practice [20].

The tea drinking habit can be discovered in many dynasties, such as Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing [20]. Tea is treated as the Chinese traditional heritage due to its attainability and affordability [18]. From the emperor to the civilians, people from all social classes had the right to drink tea [18]. Hence, tea is certainly the undisputed “national drink” [18] of China. Chinese ancient poets, artists, and musicians loved drinking tea as its fragrance could help them create a favourable psychological atmosphere for the creation of literature, paintings, and melodies [18]. In comparison, ancient civilians usually bought tea either for their daily consumption or to entertain guests [20]. As described in Figures 2 and 3, tea is incorporated in “...the Chinese scholars’ seven daily necessities...” [3] and “... common people’s seven ones...” [3], tea drinking has always been referred to as a cultural heritage that suits both refined and popular tastes in Chinese society from the past to present days [18].

**Tea Drinking as an Embodiment of Chinese Hospitality and Harmony.** In China, it is quite common for people to make tea and serve tea in a number of situations. A common scenario is that people often have tea after their meals, as they believe that tea can improve digestion and dilute alcohol. A more significant situation, namely, entertaining friends or guests, has been indicated in the text “the practice of making and serving tea is essential whenever there are guests or friends” [3]. As integrated with another sentence “China is a country with... a land of courtesy” [18], it can be concluded that Chinese people are used to regarding the behaviour of offering tea as an effective way to show courtesy and hospitality, and to further create a harmonious atmosphere.

Tea drinking custom is closely associated with hospitality and harmony [7, 20]. A fine tea set also plays an important role in expressing politeness and hospitality to others [20]. For professional tea drinkers, there are some particular requirements of tea ware and even brewing techniques under certain circumstances. For example, they prefer to use a purple clay tea set to entertain distinguished guests, as purple clay products are perceived as a sign of dignity and gracefulness in Chinese tea drinking events. Likewise, during a tea art performing event in Fig. 2, the Chinese lady was performing Chinese tea art with the help of a wooden tea tray and an exquisite tea set. Through the indexical anchor of the Chinese tea art performing event, the potential cultural meanings of tranquility and courtesy were reflected. Additionally, there is an inextricable link between the tea drinking custom and Taoism. It implies harmony between humanity and nature. The idea of Taoism is to advocate individuals to live a quiet life of naturalness, spontaneity, simplicity, and inaction, from which the core spirit of Chinese Cha Dao (Teaism) is embedded [7][20]. To specify, water and tea are taken from nature, thus drinking tea could make individuals feel at one with nature. As tasting tea is related to both physical and spiritual pursuits of leisure and tranquility, a Chinese tea art performing event is often held in a peaceful atmosphere, and the tea drinkers in the audience usually drink their tea with little sips. It is clear from Fig. 2 that the performer was sitting in front of the tea table, making tea by herself without anyone chatting around her. Moreover, tea, water, and the wooden tea tray are all gifts from nature. Therefore, this scenario effectively demonstrated how Chinese people connected with nature and pursued harmony between mankind and nature through tea drinking.

### **Tea Drinking as a Way of Demonstrating the Popularity of Chinese Tea, Tea Culture, and Cultural Commonalities in Intercultural Communication.**

Figures 2 and 3 illustrated that Chinese tea, as a commodity and activity has been spread to other continents, and through the sentence “Chinese tea and tea culture spread to the world” [3] it can be summarised that Chinese tea is now synonymous with China in the world. The indexicality is clearer when taking the images and texts in Figures 1, 2, and 3 into consideration; the information portrayed in the two figures complemented each other.

In light of the Chinese text, it was said that “With the development of cultural exchange...Chinese tea and tea culture spread to the world” [3]. This sentence echoed a sentence in the English text, that “Tea was firstly introduced to England in the late 1650s” [33]. According to relevant research of the British tea history, it was not until around the sixteenth century, when western merchants and explorers travelled to China, that the Europeans encountered tea for the first time [13]. The Portuguese imported Chinese tea to Lisbon in Portugal, and then the Dutch sold tea to other European countries, including England [14]. The aim of Chinese tea drinking could be the equivalent to that of British coffee drinking to some extent. Chinese tea was firstly sold

in some British cafés in the seventeenth century and gradually overtook the dominant position of coffee and became the national drink in Britain [13]. Further, it was also widely adopted in the gatherings of family members and friends [13]. In brief, the commonalities of the aim of tea drinking between the two nations were closely related, even though these developed several thousand years apart. Furthermore, it can be summarised that Chinese tea has played a vital role in Chinese foreign trade history. This has also been proven by the last sentence of the Chinese text in which it was said that “Chinese tea, like Chinese silk and chinaware, has become synonymous with China in the world” [3].

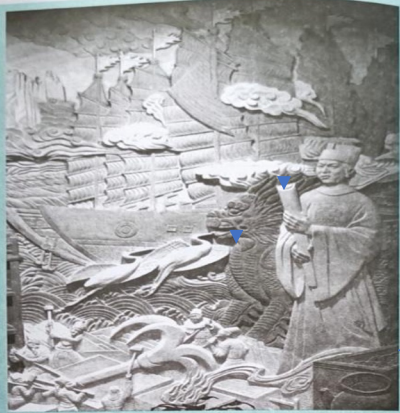
There were three cultural commonalities embodied in the three figures, namely, host the guests, relax the body, and loosen the mind. To be specific, the sentence “Chinese tea and tea culture spread to the world” [3] in Fig. 3 can be proven by the image of the afternoon tea drinking event incorporated in the English text in Fig. 1. It was described in the English text that Anna, the seventh Duchess of Bedford, invited her friends to join her for an afternoon meal and offered them tea and snacks. The image portrayed a vivid scenario of how the British defined tea drinking in terms of their own culture. It has shown that the three British ladies, who might be friends, were enjoying a good time having tea and cakes while chatting with each other. Therefore, it can be affirmed that the aim of holding a British tea drinking event is just the same as the one of Chinese tea drinking: entertaining friends and relaxing oneself.

An important point that triggered cultural commonalities across cultures is that the historical background of English tea drinking encompassed in the English text served as an echo of the Chinese text, from which students can uptake evidence of “Chinese tea and tea culture spread to the world” [3] and “Chinese tea becomes synonymous with China in the world” [3]. This extended to another information that the British afternoon tea drinking event in the image and the text were successfully combined to adequately portray how Chinese tea drinking integrated and conceptualised in another culture and created commonalities between these two cultures. While learning how to express a widely understood concept of tea drinking with Chinese cultural conceptualisations, Chinese students can also learn more about how people in various speech communities such as the British speech community, explicate their specific cultural conceptualisations for the same concept in English. Hence, students are able to realise that English users from various cultural backgrounds can interpret the same concept according to their respective cultural conceptualisations. As a result, the development of Chinese students’ meta-cultural competence may be cultivated.

## 4.2 Example 2: World Exploration

Example 2 is excerpted from the translation exercise of Unit 4, Book A. The topic of this section was focused on worldwide ancient voyages. It depicted a historical event which occurred in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1683) in the fifteenth century. A person named Zheng He was nominated by the Ming Emperor to launch seven voyages (1405-1433) to visit countries overseas. The cultural event schema world exploration was explicitly portrayed through a semiotic process. Fig. 4 depicted the history of Zheng He’s world exploration and the ancient global trade cooperation during this exploration. Fig. 5 was the answer key for the Chinese-to-English translation exercise shown in Fig. 4.

11 Translate the following paragraph into English.




A container with the emperor's imperial edict and seal in it

Qilin

Shipbuilding (shipwrights and tools)

郑和是中国历史上最著名的航海家 (maritime explorer)。公元1405年, 明朝的统治者为了稳固边防 (border defense) 和开展海上贸易, 派郑和下西洋 (the Western Seas)。在此后的28年里, 郑和带领船队七下西洋, 前后出海的人员有10多万人, 访问了30多个国家和地区。船队纵横南亚、西亚, 一直到非洲大陆。郑和下西洋是世界航海 (navigation) 史上的壮举, 它展现了郑和卓越的航海和组织才能, 同时展现了明朝的国力和国威 (national strength and prestige), 加强了明朝和海外各国之间的关系。



Coins and coin box

Porcelain

Fig. 4. The Chinese-to-English Translation Exercise of Unit 4, Book A.

Zheng He was the most famous maritime explorer in Chinese history. In 1405 AD, the ruler of the Ming Dynasty sent Zheng He on a voyage to the Western Seas in order to strengthen border defense and develop trade by sea. In the following 28 years, Zheng He led his fleet, made seven voyages to the Western Seas with over 100,000 crew members in total, and visited more than 30 countries and regions. The fleet traveled far into South Asia and West Asia, and made all the way to the continent of Africa. Zheng He's voyages to the Western Seas were a great feat in the world's navigation history. It showed Zheng He's outstanding navigation and organization talents; meanwhile, it exhibited the national strength and prestige of the Ming Dynasty, and strengthened the relationships between the Ming Dynasty and the overseas countries.

[26]

Fig. 5. The Answer Key for the Chinese-to-English Translation Exercise of Unit 4, Book A.

### **World Exploration as a Means of Promoting Worldwide Intercultural Communication and Developing Peaceful Diplomatic Relations.**

In accordance with the image, it has been recognised that the outside wall of the giant ship was carved with an auspicious creature, Qilin. Qilin can be perceived as the symbol of peace and fortune in Chinese traditional culture [29]. The aim was to offer an indexical sign that made the information included in the text and the image more complementary. Additionally, it reminded Chinese readers of its interconnection with the cultural exchanges between Ming Dynasty and foreign countries and Ming's Qilin Diplomacy.

In traditional portrayal, the mythical animal Qilin is described as a beast that has a deer's body, oxtail, claws or hooves, and scaly, yellow skin [34]. Zheng He's fleet visited many countries and even went as far as the east coast of Africa [34], and as also mentioned in Fig. 5, "...visited more than 30 countries and regions and...made all the way to the continent of Africa" [26]. Hence, he and other envoys saw many unfamiliar animals such as the giraffe along their route. They found both creatures were similar in appearance, thus, naturally transferred their impression of the legendary image of Qilin to the giraffe [15, 34]. Additionally, it has been stated that the word for giraffe in Somali at that period of time was giri, for which its Chinese transliteration was quite similar to Qilin [15]. During the fourth voyage (1413-1415), they accepted the first gift of a giraffe (1414) from the king of Bangladesh and shipped it back to the royal court of the Yongle Era of the Ming Dynasty [34]. The giraffe was defined as an incarnation as it catered to the appearance and pronunciation of Qilin [34]. Further, it also served as the cultural interconnection of these two and triggered the Qilin Diplomacy. Many overseas countries followed the example of Bangladesh to maintain good neighbourly and friendly relations with Ming [34].

Concerning the sentence "...strengthened the relationships between Ming and the overseas countries" [26], and the container with the emperor's imperial edict and seal held in his hands, it can be affirmed that Zheng He's seven voyages involved a strong political purpose. The idea of developing diplomatic relations was due to the shift of the Yongle Emperor Zhu Di's cognition of the world. Zhu believed that the appropriate way to maintain Ming's prolonged political stability was to respect other countries' political sovereignties and cultural varieties, and develop peaceful diplomacy with them [21]. Ming continually accepted giraffes from countries including Bangladesh, Malindi, and ancient Arabia from the fourth to the seventh voyage, and this Qilin Diplomacy lasted for a few years after Zheng He completed all the voyages [34]. In return, the Ming Emperor dispatched troops to help some countries contain rebellions and gave gorgeous fabrics to the kings who sent rare animal species to Ming [34].

### **World Exploration as a Means of Boosting Economic Development on the Maritime Silk Road.**

As can be seen from the image shown in Fig. 4, the two indexical signs, the porcelain and the coin box, were consequential for generating the Chinese cultural meaning of developing the Maritime Silk Road. Chinese students may start a process of semiosis according to their recognition of both the signs and the text. Specifically, they may reflect them back to the history of the Ming Dynasty, meanwhile, resonating with the information given in the text. According to the sentence "...sent Zheng He on a voyage...in order to...develop trade by sea" [26], it can be affirmed that the signs are closely associated with the best-known overseas trading event in the fifteenth century, the porcelain trade on the Maritime Silk route. Thus, further interpretations by the Chinese students related to porcelain trade, currency, and the Silk Road may be developed.

The porcelain in Fig. 4 has developed a strong implication for the prosperity of Chinese ancient foreign trade. The development of the ancient Maritime Silk Road was in its heyday during the administration of Ming [10, 34], hence, there were many domestic products introduced and sold overseas, such as porcelains. Ming inherited the exquisite porcelain making technology and the political foreign trade strategy from former dynasties. It has been recorded that the products were introduced and exported by the envoys on Zheng He's merchant fleet to a number of countries along the Maritime Silk route, especially the ones in Southeast Asia [12]. As a result, the Ming Dynasty developed prosperous economic relations with nations in this region, such as Sumatra, ancient Thailand, and ancient Malaysia [12].

The coins shown in Fig. 4 implied that the voyages stimulated the currency circulation of the Great Maritime Navigation Era. The copper coins made by Ming were in circulation in the local markets in Java, Indonesia [22]. As more countries became involved in the trading boom brought by the voyages, plenty of silver flowed into the society of Ming at a prodigious rate, thus creating a 500-year-long Silver Era since then [22]. Therefore, it is valid to say that the Ming Dynasty made a great contribution to the worldwide economic exchanges.

### **World Exploration as a Means of Showing Shipbuilding and Voyaging Technologies.**

The shipwrights and tools in Fig. 4 can be referred to as the superb shipbuilding and voyaging technologies of Ming. Firstly, the shipbuilding experts of Ming overcame technical difficulties of watertightness and deep draft. Specifically, the fleet led by Zheng He carried many items such as tea, grain, cloth, and silk products which could not become damp [6]. Additionally, there was a merchant fleet with more than 27,400 people on board in each voyage, including crew members, doctors, envoys, and soldiers [6, 28]. From this view, the shipbuilding technology at that time had reached a level that ships with damp-proof systems and deep drafts could be built.

Another reason that Fig. 4 demonstrated Chinese technologies was due to the Chinese historical background in voyaging and sea navigation. China has a long history of voyaging from the Qin Dynasty (221BC-207BC) [28]. Since the rise of the Maritime Silk Road, Chinese Dynasties made constant innovations on navigation and location to satisfy the growing overseas trade. The Chinese compass, as one of Chinese great inventions invented in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) was widely applied to navigations two centuries earlier than the western countries, therefore, providing technical support for the fleet [6]. Further to this, in the Yuan (1271-1368) and Ming Dynasties, China's navigation technology developed even more. The experts invented a measuring method called Qian Xing Shu (astronomic observation-based navigation), by which people on board observed stars such as the Pole Star, to locate the longitude and latitude [6][28].

Regarding the sentences "...with over 100,100 crew members in total" [26] and "...visited more than 30 countries and regions" [26], it was precisely because Ming had the most advanced technologies of shipbuilding and navigating that Zheng He's mission of visiting other countries could be successfully completed. Moreover, as echoed in the sentence "it exhibited the national strength and prestige..." [26], the fleet fully exemplified the world's leading position of Ming in conducting frequent maritime activities, thus showing the national strength of scientific technology.

In summary, the two Chinese cultural event schemas analysed in this section have effectively demonstrated Chinese nativisation and conceptualisation of the English language (RQ 1). Furthermore, texts and images were indexically connected to generate Chinese cultural conceptualisations of the two general concepts, tea drinking and world exploration. Moreover, the semiosis generated by the data, the texts, and the images

successfully encouraged students to draw dual attention to Chinese culture, as well as cultures of English users from other speech communities. Hence, Chinese students can better understand cultural differences and communicate and negotiate their respective cultural conceptualisations with English users from different cultural communities when intercultural communication occurs. In this view, Chinese students' meta-cultural competence may be developed (RQ 2). Further to this, the identified evidence within the Chinese culture-informed contents was well organised and echoed the cultural discourse principles adopted in this study in three aspects, i.e., i) the analysis of the selected examples and the content in this study have taken foot in Chinese social context and based upon Chinese culture and Chinese students' particular need for the development of meta-cultural competence; ii) the analysis has taken into consideration the global vision of cross-cultural communicative ability, that is, the need for the development of meta-cultural competence to deal with cultural diversity in intercultural communication; and iii) this study has positively referred to relevant global scholarly traditions in the aspects of theory, methodology, and terminology.

## **5 Conclusion**

### **5.1 Contributions of this Study**

This study has made contributions to the research field of Chinese ELT textbooks as it systematically analysed the data through the proposal of cultural event schemas and responded to the research gap in the following aspects. Firstly, unlike previous studies that investigated the proportions of Chinese cultural values embedded in ELT textbooks, this study took the exploration of features of cultural conceptualisation as a direction to examine the representation of Chinese culture in NHCE. In fact, cultural knowledge can be implanted in textbooks in more than one way, such as through the features of lexis, syntax, discourses, or pragmatics. Therefore, this study explored data rooted in discourses so as to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the embodiment of Chinese culture in NHCE.

The other aspect is that in addition to the investigation of the texts, this study further explored the linkage between the texts and the images to unpack the real situation of the integration of potential Chinese culture in NHCE. Traditionally, previous studies have preferred to regard the proportions of Chinese cultural values in the texts as the main direction to find culturally informed data and have ignored the role of affiliated images in conveying cultural values and themes. In fact, texts and images should be harnessed together to engender cultural connotations in which readers from that culture can develop a reflexive and critical understanding of the potential cultural values and themselves [4]. Therefore, this study treated the linkage between the text and the images as semiosis to analyse how potential Chinese culture was generated and interpreted.

### **5.2 Implications**

An implication of this study is that it is beneficial for ELT textbook writers to conceptualise cultural values and themes of the source culture with which learners from other speech varieties of the target language might not echo. As language learners have more opportunities to be exposed to the globalised world and the sociolinguistic reality, it is crucial for them to develop the ability to conceptualise their own cultural values when learning a second language [17]. Indeed, the ability to communicate and negotiate cultural conceptualisations serves as the key concept for the development of

metacultural competence. Take the tea drinking event schema as an example. NHCE writers elaborated on this universal concept in relation to two cultural event schemas: British tea drinking and Chinese tea drinking, from which the conceptualisations with other Chinese cultural notions such as politeness, hospitality, and harmony of this schema were portrayed through the contents. By this means, learners can internalise a general concept or the interpretations of this concept from other cultures into their own culture, thereby finding the matching cultural conceptualisations regarding their own cultural experiences and knowledge.

Moreover, ELT textbook writers may need to consider conceptual variation, which is an important element of metacultural competence, in textbook writing and editing. This may raise students' awareness of the increasing diversification of the target language and thus help them achieve success when communicating with speakers from other cultural backgrounds [17]. For example, according to the tea drinking event schema, NHCE writers adequately described the British tea drinking (associated image: tea drinking event held in a cheerful atmosphere) and Chinese tea drinking (associated image: tea drinking event held in a peaceful atmosphere) in the two texts of the translation exercise. This exemplified how the same language (English) was used by the two different English speech communities to encode and express their specific cultural conceptualisations towards the widely understood concept of tea drinking. Conceptual variation may encourage students to use the second language to encode their respective conceptualisations in intercultural communication, at the stage of which metacultural competence may be developed.

### 5.3 Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it is selective in terms of the small scale of the cultural conceptual framework that was adopted. Cultural conceptual data were identified and classified in line with a subcategory of cultural schema, i.e., cultural event schema, to analyse the cultural conceptual evidence embedded in NHCE. Cultural conceptual features can be identified through other analytical tools such as cultural conceptual metaphors, cultural categories, and the other four types of cultural schema, i.e., role schema, image schema, proposition schema, and emotion schema [16]. By using the entire cultural conceptual tools, there could be a more nuanced understanding of how NHCE considers English nativisation, as well as how it develops students' metacultural competence.

Further to this, there was limited discussion about potential meanings which have been mentioned in the evidence of world exploration. For instance, the interpretation of the Maritime Silk Road does not only mean to deepen the trade cooperation with countries to achieve win-win development, but also closely associated with contemporary Chinese national Silk Road Strategies, thus promoting relations between countries and paying great attention to the development of common world values. In this regard, further interpretations of the phrase *Silk Road* in terms of the world community was not discussed in this study.

Another limitation is that although this study investigated the contribution of the NHCE series towards the development of Chinese students' metacultural competence, metacultural competence is realised not only from Chinese ELT textbooks, but through Chinese ELT classrooms and English Language (EL) teachers as well [31]. Future studies could be extended to include explorations around factors in Chinese ELT classrooms and EL teachers which may affect the cultivation of students' metacultural competence.

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